

OBSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT IN INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



Michelle Sands
Northern Illinois University

Observation and Assessment in Inclusive Early Childhood Education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

Preface

1: Introduction to Assessment and Its Many Purposes in Early Childhood Education and Care

- 1.1: Assumptions and Beliefs About the Term "Assessment"
- 1.2: Assessment vs. Testing
- 1.3: Assessment as a Critical Component of Early Childhood Education and Practice
- 1.4: Defining Assessment as a Collaborative Process
- 1.5: Six Purposes of Early Childhood Assessment
- 1.6: Conclusion and References

2: Education, Assessment, and the Law

- 2.1: Introduction
- 2.2: Americans with Disabilities Act (2008)
- 2.3: Every Student Succeeds Act (2016)
- 2.4: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
- 2.5: Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)
- 2.6: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004)
- 2.7: Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities
- 2.8: References

3: Quality Counts

- 3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap
- 3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike
- 3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality
- 3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices
- 3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices
- 3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices
- 3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms
- 3.8: Conclusion and References

4: Observation and Documentation - The Key to Intentional Teaching

- 4.1: The Role of Observation
- 4.2: Becoming a Skilled Observer
- 4.3: Observations Can Be Spontaneous or Planned
- 4.4: Questions You May Want to Ask Yourself As You Plan Your Next Observation
- 4.5: The Role of Documentation
- 4.6: Objective Versus Subjective Observation Evidence
- 4.7: Recognizing Your Biases
- 4.8: Ethical Guidelines When Observing Children
- 4.9: Observation and Documentation Dos and Don'ts
- 4.10: Conclusion and References

5: Using Authentic Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques to Gather Evidence

- 5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data
- 5.2: Understanding the Child
- 5.3: Let's Get Started
- 5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques
- 5.5: Conclusion and References

6: How to Plan Effective and Meaningful Curriculum and Instruction

- 6.1: Early Childhood Curriculum and Pedagogy
- 6.2: Benefits of Implementing a Meaningful Curriculum
- 6.3: The Curriculum Planning Cycle at a Glance
- 6.4: A Closer Look at the Curriculum Planning Cycle
- 6.5: Critical Components of Play Center Plans, Small and Large Group Planning, and Assessment in Early Childhood Education
- 6.6: Summative Assessment—To What Extent Have Students Mastered the Standards?
- 6.7: Conclusion and References

7: The Purpose, Process and Practice of Progress Monitoring, Screening and Evaluating for Determining Eligibility for Special Education Support and Services

- 7.1: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Progress Monitoring and Universal Screening
- 7.2: Child Find Procedures and Developmental Screening
- 7.3: Multidisciplinary Comprehensive Evaluation for Determining Eligibility for Special Education
- 7.4: Conclusion and References

8: Using Standardized Assessment Tools – Characteristics, Methods and Techniques

- 8.1: Defining Standardized Assessment Tools
- 8.2: Norm-Referenced and Criterion-Referenced Assessment Tools
- 8.3: Selecting a Standardized Assessment Tool
- 8.4: Using Standardized Assessment Tools
- 8.5: Conclusion and References

9: Collaborating and Partnering with Families for Purposes of Assessment

- 9.1: Introduction
- 9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art
- 9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress
- 9.4: Family Conferences
- 9.5: Conclusion and References

[Index](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Appendix: Additional Instructional Materials](#)

[Detailed Licensing](#)

[Detailed Licensing](#)

Licensing

A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in [Back Matter/Detailed Licensing](#).

Preface

About this Open Educational Resource (OER)

The field of education is ever changing as we identify, explore, and implement evidence-based practices, and strive to support the needs of ALL students. In early childhood education, recommended practices and educational policy recommendations have fueled the expansion of inclusive early childhood programs. The number of blended early childhood teacher preparation programs (preparing preservice teachers for general and special education responsibilities) has increased dramatically over the past decade. However, most of the early childhood textbooks available to instructors, faculty and/or students are costly, and often force the instructor to choose between depth on a specific topic (observation/assessment) or description of use of inclusive practices. For example, there exists textbooks that are specific to addressing observation and assessment of children with disabilities but these typically do not address the various purposes of assessment or assessment's role in the instructional cycle and the foundational skills related to observation. Similarly, there exists textbooks describing observation and assessment practices, but these do not address the role/responsibilities of teachers specific to and skills needed to complete a comprehensive assessment for the purposes of determining a child's eligibility for special education services. Because of this, instructors may need to rely on multiple textbooks and/or outside resources to nurture their students acquisition of necessary skills and knowledge.

It is my hope that this Open Educational Resource (OER) will not only increase access to the information needed to nurture all our university students' skills and knowledge specific to observation and assessment of all young children, but it will also allow for others outside of the university (i.e. instructors, faculty, and/or students) to benefit from having a text that approaches observation and assessment of young children from a more holistic approach - addressing skills and knowledge necessary for an early childhood general education, special education and/or blended classroom teacher. This includes, but is not limited to: understanding the many purposes of assessment, types of assessment (i.e. universal screening, developmental screening, developmental assessment, formative/summative assessment, etc.) and characteristics of these recommended practices related to child and family assessment, use of assessment for purposes of instructional planning and evaluation/data-based decision making, collaborating with others (i.e. professionals, families, etc.) for assessment purposes, understanding the legal mandates specific to assessment (i.e. child find procedures in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (2017), etc.), methods of assessment, forms of alternative assessment, and use of culturally and linguistically responsive practices in assessment. Having one resource accessible to all that includes information on each of these subjects and which directly ties the information back to recommended and developmentally appropriate practice (Division for Early Childhood 2014; National Association for the Education of Young Children 2020), and which can be easily updated, and modified, will help ensure instructors, faculty and students are able to have up-to-date knowledge on the topic of observation and assessment of all young children.

This book and its ancillary materials were created by Michelle M. Sands, Ph. D at Northern Illinois University for SESE 423 and SESE 523 *Observation and Assessment in Early Childhood Special Education* and was made possible through an Illinois Secretary of State/Illinois State Library (ISL) OER Grant awarded to Northern Illinois University Libraries' project: *Huskies Unbound: Developing OER for Undergraduate Success in High-Impact Courses*. Funded by a one-time \$3 million allocation to the Illinois Secretary of State's Budget in FY24, and facilitated by the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI), the ISL OER Grant Program was created to support the development of textbooks and ancillaries as open educational resources to reduce students' costs, encourage student success, and allow faculty to adapt materials to meet local needs.

I wish to express my gratitude to Illinois Governor JB Pritzker, Illinois Secretary of State Alexander Giannoulas, and Greg McCormick, Director of the Illinois State Library, for their commitment to Open Education.

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Peer Review

The Peer Reviewer process is planned for Spring, 2026. Peer reviewers will include tenured-track faculty at Institutions of Higher Education within the field of special and early childhood education.

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Division for Early Childhood. 2014. "DEC Recommended Practices." <https://divisionearlychildhood.egnyte.com/dl/7urLPWCt5U>

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Introduction to Assessment and Its Many Purposes in Early Childhood Education and Care

Assessment is a cornerstone of effective early childhood education, guiding instructional decisions, supporting developmental progress, and ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities. Two national organizations provide guidance to professionals in the field of early childhood education, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; 2022) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC; 2014) of the Council for Exceptional Children, have each outlined developmentally appropriate and recommended practices for assessment. These best practices emphasize the importance of systematic, collaborative, and culturally responsive assessment methods. This chapter integrates these practices into a comprehensive discussion of assessment in early childhood education and care.

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Define and explain the term "assessment" in early childhood education and distinguish it from formal testing, citing key differences in purpose and application.
2. Identify best practices related to assessment as outlined by NAEYC (2022) and DEC (2014) and describe the importance of authentic, systematic, and culturally responsive assessment methods.
3. Examine six primary purposes of early childhood assessment, including planning instruction, revising instruction, ensuring accountability, evaluating programs, screening, and determining eligibility for special education services.

[1.1: Assumptions and Beliefs About the Term "Assessment"](#)

[1.2: Assessment vs. Testing](#)

[1.3: Assessment as a Critical Component of Early Childhood Education and Practice](#)

[1.4: Defining Assessment as a Collaborative Process](#)

[1.5: Six Purposes of Early Childhood Assessment](#)

[1.6: Conclusion and References](#)

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1.1: Assumptions and Beliefs About the Term “Assessment”

The term “assessment” is often associated with formal testing; however, in early childhood education, assessment is a broader, ongoing process that involves gathering information about children’s development, learning, and well-being (McAfee et al. 2016). Assessment has also been defined as “Almost any form of measurement and appraisal of what children know and can do” and “the process of gathering information about children from several forms of evidence, then organizing and interpreting that information” (McAfee et al. 2004; 2016). NAEYC’s definition of assessment specifically addresses its purpose as a means of informing and revising instruction (2022; National Research Council 2008). However, the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) defines assessment more broadly and as “the process of collecting information for the purposes of making informed decisions” (2014), and this definition is the one that will be referred to throughout the book as we address the many purposes of assessment in early childhood education.

Educators may hold different assumptions about assessment based on their training and experiences. Yet, best practices related to assessment (those from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)’s Developmentally Appropriate Practices and DEC’s Recommended Practices) include use of multiple methods and sources that are appropriate for the purpose and children’s age and development, and use of family-inclusive practices. Use of multiple methods and sources refers to the belief that young children’s abilities should not be measured solely through standardized testing, but rather through diverse approaches such as observation, caregiver input, and play-based interactions (NAEYC 2022). Another foundational assumption is that assessment should be useful and practical, guiding decisions about instruction and intervention rather than serving as an isolated activity (DEC 2014).

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1.2: Assessment vs. Testing



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While related, assessment and testing serve different functions and have different definitions. Assessment is an ongoing, dynamic process that informs educational decisions, while testing refers to structured, standardized evaluations used to measure specific skills or knowledge at a single point in time (Shepard et al. 2017). DEC emphasizes that assessment should be used to inform instruction and intervention rather than for high-stakes decision-making that may not reflect a child's true abilities (DEC 2014).

The key differences between the terms “assessment” and “testing” are as follows:

- Assessment is comprehensive: It gathers data from multiple sources, including direct observation, caregiver interviews, and authentic performance tasks (DEC 2014). A test or tests may be included in an assessment but should not be the only method of collecting information.
- Assessment is a process: When used to inform instruction, it should occur continuously, rather than being limited to periodic testing events (McAfee et al. 2016). When used to determine eligibility for special education services and support, the comprehensive assessment should include opportunities for collecting and analyzing data, and interdisciplinary collaboration. A test or tests can be a part of the assessment process but should not be the sole component.
- Testing is often standardized: While standardized tools have their place, they should be used alongside other authentic measures to provide a holistic understanding of a child's development (DEC 2014).

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1.3: Assessment as a Critical Component of Early Childhood Education and Practice

Assessment is not separate from teaching but an integral part of it. Effective educators use assessment data to plan, modify, and evaluate instruction (McLachlan et al. 2018). Best practices highlight that assessment should be linked to curriculum goals, ensuring that data collected is directly applicable to instructional decisions (NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014). However, early childhood teachers also have a responsibility to identify potential need for additional support and services, including special education. Furthermore, teachers should use assessment to evaluate their classroom and/or program's ability to meet the specific program requirements and meet individual and/or program improvement goals and objectives.

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1.4: Defining Assessment as a Collaborative Process

Assessment in early childhood education should not be the sole responsibility of teachers, nor should it be conducted in isolation. Best practices emphasize that assessment should be a collaborative effort involving families, educators, paraprofessionals, related service providers, administrators, and/or community members (NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014). This collaborative approach ensures a more accurate and holistic understanding of a child or organization's abilities and needs (Bagnato et al. 2010).



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Collaboration with Families

Families provide valuable insight into a child's development, culture, and daily experiences. They also can provide teachers and programs with important information about their perspectives on how well a program addresses their needs as a family or as members of a community. Best practices include assessment processes include family input and perspectives to ensure they reflect the child's typical behaviors and abilities across different settings (NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014). Educators should also engage families in discussions about assessment results and collaborate with them to develop their child's individual learning goals, but also classroom and program improvement goals and objectives (Epstein 2011; NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014).

Collaboration with Paraprofessionals and Assistants

Paraprofessionals and classroom assistants play a key role in documenting children's progress through observations, work samples, and behavioral notes (Giangreco et al. 2010). Paraprofessionals also provide an essential role in a classroom or program's ability to meet program requirements and/or classroom and/or program improvement goals and objectives. The DEC guidelines emphasize that all staff should be trained in using assessment tools accurately and ethically to ensure consistency and reliability (DEC 2014).

Collaboration with Related Service Providers and Community Partners

Collaboration with speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and other professionals or community partners ensures that when assessing an individual child, the team captures a comprehensive picture of the child's development (Bricker 2002). Best practices also describe how assessment should be multidisciplinary, incorporating expertise from multiple professionals (including community partners) to support not only young children's individualized learning and intervention but also classroom and program improvement (NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014).

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1.5: Six Purposes of Early Childhood Assessment

Assessment serves multiple functions in early childhood education, from guiding instruction to ensuring program effectiveness. In the video “Early Childhood Assessment Purposes,” Kristie Pretti- Frontczak (2015) describes the following six purposes of assessment in early childhood programs: (a) planning instruction, (b) revising instruction, (c) accountability, (d) program evaluation, (e) screening, and 6) determining eligibility for special education. When used for each of these purposes, assessment can answer valuable questions to enhance student outcomes and teaching effectiveness.

Watch the video here:

[Early Childhood Assessment Purposes - YouTube](#)

Planning and Revising Instruction

Potential Question: What are we doing to help children achieve state learning standards and individualized education program goals?

Assessment provides critical information that helps teachers design instruction that aligns with children's developmental levels, interests, and learning needs (McAfee et al. 2016). Best practices emphasize that assessments should be aligned with instructional goals and integrated into daily teaching practices (NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014). Effective assessment allows teachers to identify instructional strategies that are working and those that need adjustment (Gullo 2013). Assessment data should be used dynamically to inform real-time instructional decisions (NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014). Information about planning and revising instruction will be discussed with more detail in Chapter Five: How to Plan Effective and Meaningful Curriculum Using Observation Data.

Accountability

Potential Question: What are we doing to demonstrate continuous improvement toward state, federal and/or program standards (i.e., early childhood outcomes, Head Start program performance standards)?

In early childhood education, assessment plays a role in accountability at multiple levels. Educators use assessments to demonstrate student progress, while programs and policymakers use data to ensure compliance with quality standards and funding requirements (Shepard et al. 2017). While assessment plays a role in accountability, educators and program administrators are cautioned to not misuse assessment for high-stakes decision-making (NAEYC 2022; DEC 2014). Accountability measures should be developmentally appropriate, equitable, and not cause undue stress for children (Shepard et al. 2017). Additional information about accountability will be discussed with more detail in Chapter Three: Quality Counts.

Program Evaluation

Potential Question: What are we doing to demonstrate continuous improvement toward our program's mission and/or vision?

Research consistently demonstrates high-quality early childhood programs have significant and lasting benefits for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. High-quality early learning environments—characterized by well-trained educators, low child-to-teacher ratios, and evidence-based curricula—are associated with improved school readiness, higher academic achievement, and better social-emotional skills (Phillips et al. 2017). Longitudinal studies, such as the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project, have shown children who attend high-quality early childhood programs are more likely to graduate from high school, secure stable employment, and have higher lifetime earnings (Heckman et al. 2010). Furthermore, children in quality early learning settings exhibit lower rates of behavioral problems and greater social competence (Yoshikawa et al. 2013).

Maintaining the benefits of a high-quality early childhood program requires a commitment to continuous quality improvement (CQI)—a systematic, data-driven process that ensures early childhood programs evolve to meet the needs of diverse learners. CQI involves ongoing professional development for educators, frequent assessment of program effectiveness, and responsive adjustments based on research and child outcomes (Tout et al. 2013). Without sustained quality improvement efforts, early childhood programs risk stagnation, limiting their ability to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children. CQI can include, but is not limited to, informal program improvement processes, working toward national accreditation from organizations such as NAEYC or quality ratings from a state Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). Additional information about program evaluation will be discussed with more detail in [Chapter Three: Quality Counts](#).

Screening

Screening assessments are a critical component of early childhood programs as they identify the potential need for further intervention, support, and or comprehensive evaluation (NAEYC 2022; Centers for Disease Control [CDC] 2024; NRC 2008). Therefore, when used appropriately, screening assessments can promote positive outcomes for young children. Within early childhood programs, two types of screening assessments are utilized: universal screening assessments and developmental screening assessments.

According to DEC (2021), *universal screening assessments* are those used in an early childhood multi-tiered systems of support framework. These assessments are often included in a list of universal or Tier 1 supports provided in a high-quality early childhood classroom or program. Potential Question: What actions are we taking to support ALL students' achievement of specific learning standards?

Universal screening assessments are meant to be used as a systematic (or planned) way of gathering information about a child's specific set of skills (DEC 2021) and are one component of a program's multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Typically, universal screening assessments are related to literacy, math, and social/emotional skill sets. The goal of universal screening is to ensure that no child is overlooked and that all children are given the opportunity to receive the appropriate support if needed. It is a proactive and preventative measure, aiming to detect potential problems early on, allowing for timely intervention before challenges become more severe. Universal screening assessments are typically brief and standardized, offering a snapshot of a child's abilities and areas that may require closer monitoring or additional assessment.

Developmental screening assessments examine children's multiple domains of child development, including cognitive, motor, language, adaptive, and social-emotional skills (Bricker 2002) with the purpose of identifying whether or not there are potential concerns or needs for further or comprehensive assessment. Similar to universal screening assessments, developmental screening assessments are typically brief and offer a snapshot of a child's abilities. They are often a critical element of Child Find provisions in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004), which require states to implement thorough procedures to discover, identify, and connect children with disabilities—from birth through age 21—to appropriate early intervention or special education services at the earliest possible stage.

Determining Eligibility for Special Education Services and Support

Comprehensive assessments (or sometimes referred to as case study evaluations) help determine whether a child qualifies for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004). Comprehensive assessments involve a multidisciplinary team and multiple sources of data, including observations, standardized tests, and parent interviews (McAfee et al. 2016). Eligibility decisions ensure that children with disabilities receive the supports and services they need to succeed. Further information about comprehensive assessment procedures can be found in Chapter Seven: The Purpose, Process, and Practice of Progress Monitoring, Screening, and Eligibility for Special Education Support and Services

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1.6: Conclusion and References

Assessment in early childhood education serves as a foundational tool for supporting children's development, guiding instructional decisions, and ensuring program quality. Understanding the diverse purposes of assessment—ranging from planning instruction to determining special education eligibility—enables educators to implement meaningful and developmentally appropriate assessment practices. By embracing assessment as a collaborative and continuous process, early childhood professionals can create more inclusive and effective learning environments for all children.

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Additional Resources:

- [Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement](#) (NAEYC 2019)
- [Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators \(Draft Revision\)](#) (NAEYC 2024)
- [Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation](#) (NAEYC 2003)
- [Early Childhood Inclusion: A Position Statement](#) (NAEYC and DEC 2009)
- [Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators: A Position Statement](#) (NAEYC 2020)
- [Screening and Assessment of Young English Language Learners](#) (NAEYC and NAECS/SDE 2005)
- [Early Childhood Recommended Practices Module 7: Assessment](#)
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Education, Assessment, and the Law

Understanding the legal foundations of education and assessment is essential for early childhood educators. These laws define policies, practices, and ethical responsibilities educators must follow when working with young children, especially those with disabilities. This chapter explores legislation that ensures equity, access, and accountability in educational settings, focusing on how these laws influence assessment and instructional decisions in early childhood education.

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Identify and explain key federal laws that impact education and assessment for children with disabilities.
2. Describe the six main principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
3. Understand the process of initial eligibility and placement under IDEA.
4. Explain the role of inclusive practices in early childhood education.
5. Evaluate current trends and challenges in inclusive early childhood settings.

[2.1: Introduction](#)

[2.2: Americans with Disabilities Act \(2008\)](#)

[2.3: Every Student Succeeds Act \(2016\)](#)

[2.4: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#)

[2.5: Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#)

[2.6: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(2004\)](#)

[2.7: Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities](#)

[2.8: References](#)

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2.1: Introduction

Several federal laws and policies have a direct impact on the education system in the United States. Civil rights laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability and has been enforced through the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights or the US Department of Justice. These civil rights laws include the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In addition to civil rights laws, other federal laws ensure that children with disabilities receive special education and support, and the laws provide federal financial assistance to state and local education agencies to guarantee these supports and services. The Every Student Succeeds Act (2016) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) are enforced through review of educational results and outcomes for students with disabilities. Historically, this has been overseen by the US Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programming and Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

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2.2: Americans with Disabilities Act (2008)

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was first passed in 1990 and was then updated in 2008. The ADA is a federal civil rights law that protects people with disabilities from discrimination. Its goal is to ensure that people with disabilities have equal rights and the same opportunities as individuals without disabilities regarding education, work, transportation, and access to public places.

In schools, the ADA requires that students with disabilities be provided the same opportunities as other students. Schools must ensure that students with disabilities can access school buildings, participate in programs, and benefit from the same services offered to other students. The ADA also requires that schools make "reasonable accommodations" to help these students succeed.

Schools' and Teachers' Responsibilities under the ADA:

- Ensure that students with disabilities are treated fairly and provided with the resources they need, including but not limited to ensuring access to education, providing accommodations, and fostering inclusion.
- Ensure that students with disabilities are not excluded from any educational activities, whether in the classroom, on school trips, or during extracurricular activities. For example: If a student uses a service animal, the school must allow the animal to accompany the student to all school events (US Department of Education, 2025).
- Provide reasonable accommodations to help students with disabilities succeed. Accommodations might include changes to how lessons are taught, the tools used in the classroom, or even the classroom itself. For example: Students with hearing impairments may need captions on videos, while students with mobility issues might need ramps or special furniture to move around comfortably. These accommodations help ensure that students with disabilities can participate fully in their education (Graber and Dragoo, 2024).
- Work with parents and related service professionals to develop plans that support students with disabilities. For students who need special education services, schools create Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that outline specific goals and services. While the ADA doesn't directly require IEPs, it supports this process by making sure that students with disabilities have access to the help they need.
- Understand their roles and responsibilities related to supporting students with disabilities. Teachers must know how to adjust their teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students, whether by offering different ways of learning or using technology to help students with disabilities participate in lessons (Graber and Dragoo, 2024).
- Ensure that all technology used in the classroom is accessible to students with disabilities. For example: Educational websites and digital tools must be usable by students with visual impairments or other disabilities. Teachers must make sure that resources like videos have captions, images have text descriptions, and that all digital content is easy to navigate for all students (US Department of Education, 2025).

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2.3: Every Student Succeeds Act (2016)

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into federal law in 2015, replacing the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESSA aims to improve educational outcomes for all students. The law provides states with some flexibility while still holding them accountable for student performance. ESSA emphasizes the need for inclusivity, academic equity, and use of evidence-based interventions. The law is especially important for early childhood education as it recognizes the value of early learning programs in setting students on a path to academic success (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

In early childhood education, ESSA encourages the use of evidence-based interventions that support young learners. These practices may include strategies like social-emotional learning (SEL), which helps children build skills for managing emotions, forming relationships, and problem-solving. Studies have demonstrated that SEL programs can improve students' social and academic outcomes, particularly for children with disabilities or those at risk of academic failure (Zins et al. 2004). By promoting these evidence-based practices, ESSA ensures that early childhood educators have the tools they need to help all children succeed.

One of the most significant aspects of ESSA is its support for students with disabilities, students from low-income backgrounds, and English language learners. The law mandates that states and districts look not only at classroom and school-wide assessment data, but also assessment data of these specific subgroups to ensure that they also are making progress toward academic expectations. ESSA also includes provisions to improve early childhood education programs, ensuring that young learners receive the support they need to thrive in school, and use of response-to-intervention or multi-tiered systems of supports (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

Schools' and Teachers' Responsibilities Under ESSA:

- Provide equitable access to education for all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and students from low-income backgrounds. Teachers must adapt their instruction to meet the needs of these students, ensuring they have access to the general education curriculum. For example: Teachers may need to differentiate instruction for students with disabilities or ELLs, such as providing additional language support or using assistive technology (U.S. Department of Education 2016).
- Use evidence-based practices in the classroom—research-proven strategies that support student learning. These practices might include differentiated instruction, SEL programs, or personalized interventions for struggling students. Teachers must also stay informed about the latest research in education to ensure they are using the most effective strategies for all students (National Association for the Education of Young Children 2022).
- Work to foster inclusion, ensuring that students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms. Teachers must create inclusive learning environments where all students, regardless of their abilities, can participate and thrive. These environments should include necessary accommodations, such as modified assignments, assistive technologies, or physical adaptations to the classroom. Teachers are also responsible for implementing individualized support to help students with disabilities meet academic standards (U.S. Department of Education 2016).
- Establish high academic standards and regularly assess students' progress. Teachers must ensure that their students meet these standards while using developmentally appropriate assessments. For example: In early childhood education, assessments should go beyond traditional tests and include a mix of observational data, social-emotional development assessments, and other measures that provide a holistic view of each student's growth (U.S. Department of Education 2016).
- Teachers and schools must collaborate with families and communities to support student success. Teachers must maintain open lines of communication with parents, provide them with regular updates on their child's progress, and involve them in decision-making processes, especially for students requiring additional support. For example: In early childhood settings, involving families is especially critical, as parents are their children's first teachers and play a significant role in their development (Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes and the Council of Chief State School Officers 2017).
- Address social-emotional learning (SEL) and mental health support, recognizing that these factors are essential for academic success. Teachers are responsible for integrating SEL programs into their classrooms, helping students build critical skills like self-regulation, relationship-building, and conflict resolution. For young children, these skills are crucial for their overall development and success in school (Zins et al. 2004).

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2.4: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first federal civil rights law to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination in any program or activity that receives federal financial assistance, including public schools. In the context of education, Section 504 continues to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities and services (US Department of Education, 2025).

Section 504 has a broader definition of disability than what is written into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). To be eligible under Section 504, a student who is eligible must only have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, such as learning, walking, seeing, hearing, or concentrating. Because of this broader definition, Section 504 covers many students who may not qualify for special education but still need accommodations in the classroom (US Department of Education, 2020).

Purpose and Impact in Early Childhood Education

In early childhood education, Section 504 plays a crucial role in making sure that young children with disabilities can participate in preschool and early learning programs on an equal basis with their typically developing peers. For example, a preschool-age child with asthma might need access to medication during the school day, while a child with sensory processing challenges might need a quiet space to calm down. These two children may not qualify for special education services and support through IDEA, but they still require accommodations for their disability. Section 504 ensures that these students and others receive the support they need to engage fully in classroom routines and learning activities. Section 504 helps guarantee that schools and teachers take proactive steps to remove barriers to learning and participation for all children with disabilities, not solely those with formal special education plans.

Responsibilities of Schools and Teachers Under Section 504:

- Identify and evaluate students who may have a disability and require accommodations under Section 504. This responsibility includes recognizing early signs that a child may be struggling due to a physical or mental impairment. Teachers play an important role in this process by observing students' behavior, monitoring progress, and communicating concerns to the school's support team. Evaluations must be based on a variety of sources, including teacher observations, medical information, and academic performance, and they must be conducted at no cost to families (U.S. Department of Education 2025).
- If a student is found eligible under Section 504, develop a written plan outlining the accommodations, services, and supports the child will receive. The 504 plan is designed to ensure the student can access the general education curriculum and participate in school activities alongside their peers. While the law does not require a specific format for 504 plans, they typically include information about the student's disability, specific accommodations (e.g., extended time on tasks, visual schedules), and the staff responsible for implementing them.
- Be actively involved in both the development and implementation of 504 plans, understand each student's accommodations, and ensure they are provided consistently and effectively in the classroom.
- Once a 504 plan is in place, provide the accommodations and modifications listed in the plan. These accommodations are meant to level the playing field, not give students an unfair advantage. Failure to implement a 504 plan can be considered a form of discrimination. For example: In classroom settings, accommodations might include seating a student near the teacher for better focus, breaking tasks into smaller steps, providing a sensory break, or using visual supports to aid comprehension.
- Adjust accommodations over time as a child grows and their needs change.
- Utilize inclusive practices to ensure all students feel safe, valued, and supported. This means using positive behavior strategies, adapting materials when necessary, and collaborating with families and specialists to support student success.
- Establish effective communication strategies between families and support staff to ensure that 504 plans are implemented successfully. Teachers are expected to participate in regular review meetings and update the team on the student's progress. In early childhood education, building strong relationships with families is especially important because parents are key partners in identifying their child's needs and advocating for appropriate accommodations.

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2.5: Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law enacted in 1974 to protect the privacy of student education records, and it applies to all educational institutions that receive federal or state funding, including early childhood education programs. FERPA grants parents or legal guardians of students under 18 and eligible students (those 18 or older or attending a postsecondary institution) the right to access, review, and request corrections to their child's education records. In the context of early childhood education, these records may include assessments, teacher observations, developmental milestones, and other confidential information regarding a child's learning and behavior (U.S. Department of Education 2021).

Under FERPA, programs must maintain the confidentiality of students' records and obtain written consent before disclosing personally identifiable information (PII), except in specific circumstances. These exceptions include compliance with a court order or legal investigation. However, FERPA allows early childhood programs to disclose certain "directory information," such as a child's name, date of birth, or participation in school-sponsored activities, unless parents opt out. This flexibility in sharing information is particularly relevant in collaborative settings, such as when teachers share information with service providers or specialists who work with the child (U.S. Department of Education 2021).

For early childhood educators, FERPA requires the careful handling of sensitive data, particularly since young children's records often include detailed observations and reports regarding development, behavior, and social-emotional growth. Teachers and staff are responsible for understanding and complying with FERPA regulations to ensure that children's privacy is protected in all aspects of their educational experience. Programs must also notify parents annually about their FERPA rights, and they must provide clear instructions about how to opt out of the release of directory information (Family Policy Compliance Office 2020). This information is usually provided in a parent handout or upon registration into a program.

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2.6: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004)

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that was originally passed in 1975 and reauthorized in 2004. It ensures that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). IDEA guarantees special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities from birth through age 21. The law describes how schools must identify, evaluate, and support students who have disabilities that impact their ability to learn in a general education classroom setting (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

IDEA promotes the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings whenever appropriate and ensures that families have a voice in their child's education. The law is especially important in early childhood education because it includes specific procedures for early intervention services for infants and toddlers (Part C) and special education for preschool-age children (Part B, Section 619).

Part B of IDEA

Part B of IDEA is the section that addresses the needs of children and youth with disabilities from ages 3 through 21. Part B outlines the services, supports, and educational rights of eligible students, and it sets expectations for schools and educators to ensure that students with disabilities receive meaningful access to the general education curriculum.

Purpose and Scope of Part B

Part B of IDEA is designed to ensure that children with disabilities receive individualized support to meet their unique needs, including providing special education services, related services (such as speech therapy or occupational therapy), and supplementary aids necessary for student success. To qualify under Part B of IDEA, a student must meet the criteria for at least one of the thirteen disability categories in the following list. (2004). The criteria for eligibility are determined by states and in some cases (including Illinois) local school districts.

Disability Categories Under IDEA

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Deaf-Blindness
- Deafness
- Emotional Disturbance
- Hearing Impairment
- Intellectual Disability
- Multiple Disabilities
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Other Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Visual Impairment, including Blindness

IDEA ensures that students with disabilities are included in statewide assessments and accountability systems and that schools use evidence-based practices to support instruction and intervention. The law is based on six principles that help ensure educational equity for students with disabilities (Turnbull & Turnbull 1978):

Zero Reject	No child can be denied the opportunity for a free and appropriate public education.
Nondiscriminatory Evaluation	Assessments used to evaluate a child must be: · nondiscriminatory · conducted in the child's primary language when possible · valid and reliable for their intended purpose, administered by qualified personnel, and used according to the test maker's instructions
Free Appropriate Public Education	Individuals eligible for special education services must receive the support and services written in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is tailored to their specific needs, ensures access to the general curriculum, aligns with state grade-level standards, and supports meaningful educational progress.
Least Restrictive Environment	Children with disabilities should be educated with their typically developing peers to the greatest extent appropriate. Removal from general education classrooms should only occur when a child's needs cannot be met with supplementary aids and services.
Parent Involvement	Parents have the right to review any records related to their child's identification, evaluation, and placement. Schools are required to notify parents in advance of meetings and ensure their participation, which may occur in person, by phone, or via video. Parental input is especially critical when making placement decisions. If a parent cannot attend, the school must document all efforts made to contact and involve them.
Procedural Due Process	Families and schools can resolve disputes through mediation or due process hearings.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Part B of IDEA requires that eligible students receive specially designed instruction and related services at no cost to their families. A free appropriate public education (FAPE) must be provided according to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that meets the student's unique needs and helps them make progress in school (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a legal document developed for every eligible student under Part B. A child's IEP team, consisting of educators, families, specialists, and sometimes the student, collaborate to create the document. The IEP outlines the student's current performance levels, measurable goals, accommodations, modifications, related services, and methods for monitoring progress. For young children in preschool, IEPs may focus on developmental areas such as communication, motor skills, and social-emotional growth (Yell and Bateman 2017).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Part B of IDEA requires that students with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent appropriate. This principle, known as the least restrictive environment (LRE), ensures that removal from the general education classroom only occurs when necessary. Schools must provide supports and services to help students participate in inclusive settings whenever possible (Turnbull et al. 2020; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Specifically in early childhood, there is guidance describing the importance of inclusion of children with disabilities in general education settings (U.S. Department of Education 2024).

Parent Involvement and Rights

IDEA Part B includes a set of [procedural safeguards](#) to protect the rights of students and their families (2004). These safeguards ensure parents are informed and involved in decisions about their child's education. These safeguards ensure parents' rights to:

- receive prior written notice before the school makes changes to a child's identification, evaluation, or placement
- give or withhold consent for evaluations and services
- access educational records
- request an independent educational evaluation (IEE) at public expense, and
- use dispute resolution options such as mediation, due process hearings, and filing complaints with the state education agency.

These procedural safeguards reinforce the importance of parent participation and accountability in the special education process and must be provided to parents/guardians of children with disabilities at least once per year.

Responsibilities of Schools and Teachers Under Part B of IDEA

- Identify, locate, and evaluate all children who may have a disability and need special education services. This is known as the "Child Find" mandate. Teachers play a critical role in this process by observing students, tracking progress, and referring children who show signs of developmental delays or learning challenges for further evaluation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).
- Complete comprehensive evaluations of students suspected of having a disability and use multiple sources of information as part of these evaluations. They must also be nondiscriminatory, meaning assessments should be given in the child's primary language and be culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- Once a child is found eligible under IDEA, they must develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) within 30 days. The IEP is a collaborative plan created by a team that includes general education teachers, special education teachers, service providers (such as speech therapists), and the child's parents.
- Implement the IEP with fidelity, making classroom accommodations, providing specialized instruction, and working with related service providers. In early childhood classrooms, this process might mean adapting lesson plans, using visual supports, modifying activities, or offering small-group instruction based on a child's goals. Failure to implement an IEP as it is written may be considered denying a child a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), a legally protected right for students with disabilities. Denial of FAPE can have legal consequences for the school and/or teacher.
- Provide access to the same general education curriculum as their peers. Teachers must ensure that lessons are accessible and inclusive. For young children, the teacher may use universal design for learning (UDL), integrate play-based learning, and create inclusive classroom environments that support a wide range of developmental abilities (National Association for the Education of Young Children 2022).
- Engage in open and respectful communication with families, share student progress, invite them to IEP meetings, and consider their input when making educational decisions.
- Collect data and regularly monitor students' progress toward their IEP goals. Progress reports must be shared with families as often as report cards are issued to general education students. If a child is not making adequate progress, the IEP team must reconvene to adjust the plan and ensure the child receives the necessary support.
- Provide related services that are necessary for a child to benefit from their education. This includes services such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, counseling, and transportation. Teachers must work closely with service providers to integrate these supports into the classroom in a way that promotes inclusion and helps the child succeed.

Federal Funding and State Responsibilities

Under Part B, states receive federal funding to support the implementation of special education services. These funds help cover the cost of identification and evaluation of children, IEP development, personnel training, and direct services to students with disabilities. In return, states must submit a plan to the U.S. Department of Education that details how they will comply with IDEA requirements (2004). States must ensure that all eligible children with disabilities receive FAPE, maintain data systems for monitoring the students' progress, and enforce policy compliance at the district level. Local education agencies (LEAs) are also expected to use funds to increase their capability and skills to address the needs of children with disabilities, reduce barriers, and support inclusive practices.

Early childhood programs must complete early childhood outcomes (ECOs) annually as a measure of each child with an IEP's progress. ECOs must be completed for children upon entry to a program and within six months of a child exiting a program, as well. They must be completed in collaboration with the child's family. There are three outcomes that programs must report on for each child: positive social-emotional skills, acquisition and use of knowledge and skills, and use of appropriate behaviors to meet needs. More information on ECOs can be found at <https://ectacenter.org/eco/pages/childoutcomes.asp>.

Part C of IDEA

Part C of IDEA specifically focuses on early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities from birth to age 3. The purpose of Part C is to promote the development of young children, enhance the capacity of families to support their child's

development, and reduce educational costs by minimizing the need for special education later in life (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004; US Department of Education 2017).

Purpose and Scope of Part C

Children who receive help early in life are more likely to achieve developmental milestones and participate in typical home and community activities. Part C of IDEA helps identify and serve infants and toddlers with developmental delays or diagnosed physical or mental conditions that are likely to lead to delays (Yell and Bateman 2017). States receive federal funding to implement early intervention systems, which must meet minimum federal requirements (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004; US Department of Education 2017).

Similar to Part B of IDEA, Part C requires states to also have a comprehensive "Child Find" system to identify infants and toddlers who may be eligible for early intervention services. This system includes public awareness campaigns, referral networks, and collaboration with hospitals, physicians, childcare providers, and other community agencies (U.S. Department of Education 2017). Evaluations must be conducted within 45 days of referral and must assess all areas of development: cognitive, physical, communication, social-emotional, and adaptive.

Once a child is found eligible for services, the early intervention team works with the family to create an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). Unlike the school-aged IEP, the IFSP focuses on the family as the primary context for the child's development. It includes:

- the child's present developmental levels
- family resources, priorities, and concerns
- specific child and/or family outcomes to be achieved
- early intervention services needed to reach those outcomes
- service delivery settings, typically in the home or other natural environments, and
- names of service coordinators.

The IFSP must be reviewed every six months and evaluated annually with the family's input (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004).

Part C of IDEA emphasizes delivering services in natural environments—places where children without disabilities typically spend their time, such as the home, park, or childcare center. Services are provided through routine-based interventions and coaching models that empower families to support their child's development in daily life. Because of this, family involvement is essential to the early intervention process. Parents are equal team members, involved in every step, from assessment to service delivery. Early interventionists use a strength-based approach to help families understand their child's needs and celebrate progress.

As a child approaches their third birthday, the IFSP team must plan for a smooth transition to preschool services under Part B of IDEA or other community-based programs. This transition planning process begins at least 90 days before the child turns three and includes:

- notifying the local education agency (LEA)
- holding a transition conference, and
- developing a transition plan in the IFSP.

These steps ensure that there is no gap in services and that families are prepared to navigate the next steps in their child's educational journey (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004; Turnbull et al. 2020; US Department of Education 2017).

Provider and Educator Responsibilities Under Part C of IDEA

Early intervention providers include developmental therapists, speech-language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, and special educators. Their responsibilities include:

- conducting evaluations and assessments
- collaborating with families and other team members to develop the IFSP
- providing services in natural environments
- supporting families in implementing strategies at home, and
- participating in transition planning (US Department of Education 2017).

Providers must also ensure that services are family-centered, culturally sensitive, and developmentally appropriate. They serve as both educators and coaches, helping families build confidence and competence.

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2.7: Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities

Inclusion is the practice of educating young children with and without disabilities together in the same early childhood settings. However, inclusion is not simply placing a child in a classroom; it is full participation and membership in the learning community. High-quality inclusive programs are intentional, collaborative, and reflective, grounded in research and supported by a system of aligned policies and practices. According to the Division for Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009), effective inclusion includes three defining features: access, participation, and supports.

- *Access* refers to providing children with a wide range of learning opportunities and environments, including modifications to materials and spaces to ensure full participation.
- *Participation* involves using individualized instructional strategies to support engagement in routines and activities.
- *Supports* include both system-level supports (such as professional development) and individualized supports (such as assistive technology or peer-mediated interventions). Inclusive classrooms may use co-teaching models, embedded instruction, peer interactions, and universal design for learning (UDL) to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Inclusion: What it Is vs. What it Is Not

What Inclusion Is	What Inclusion is NOT
Individuals with and without disabilities learning together	Individuals with disabilities placed in separate settings
Individualized supports embedded in daily routines	One-size-fits-all instruction or isolated interventions
Collaboration among teachers, specialists, and families	Working in silos without shared goals or communication
Participation in all classroom activities with peers	Observing from the sidelines or only engaging with adults
A commitment to belonging, equity, and access	Compliance-focused placement without meaningful inclusion

Research Foundations for Inclusion

Research consistently shows that inclusion benefits both children with and without disabilities. Children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms make gains in language, social interaction, and cognitive development, while their peers demonstrate increased empathy, acceptance, and leadership skills (Odom et al. 2011; Strain and Bovey 2011). Moreover, inclusive education reflects a commitment to equity and human rights, ensuring all children are valued members of the learning community.

Inclusive environments also promote continuity of care and alignment with developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), helping young children transition more smoothly between early learning settings and later schooling.

Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

- Individualizing instruction to meet diverse learning needs using strategies like differentiated instruction and UDL.
- Collaborating with specialists (e.g., speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists) and families to implement IEPs or IFSPs.
- Facilitating peer interactions that support social development and promote friendships.
- Using positive behavior supports to create predictable, nurturing environments.
- Participating in ongoing professional development to deepen their understanding of inclusive practices.
- Advocating for inclusion within their programs and communities.

While inclusion is widely supported by policy and research, implementation remains inconsistent. Barriers include limited teacher training, inadequate funding, and varying definitions of inclusion across states and programs. The U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services (2015; updated 2023) issued a [joint policy statement](#) urging states and programs to improve young children's access to inclusive high-quality early learning opportunities. Some states, [including Illinois](#) (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015), also have their own vision statement or policy statements related to inclusion of children with disabilities in early learning environments.

Indicator 6 of State Performance Plans and Annual Performance Reports

Indicator 6 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is one of several key accountability measures monitored nationally by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Indicator 6 specifically assesses the extent to which preschool children aged 3 through 5 with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) receive special education and related services in inclusive settings. This indicator examines the percentage of children who attend regular early childhood programs and receive the majority of their services there (6A), compared to those served in more restrictive environments such as separate special education classes, schools, or residential facilities (6B), or in the home (6C). States are required to collect and report this data annually through their State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR). Monitoring Indicator 6 helps ensure that states comply with the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate of IDEA, which promotes the inclusion of children with disabilities alongside their typically developing peers to the maximum extent appropriate. National oversight allows for the identification of trends, support needs, and progress toward equity in early childhood education services across states.

Indicator 6 is divided into three sub-indicators:

- 6A: Children attending a regular early childhood program and receiving the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program.
- 6B: Children attending a separate special education class, separate school, or residential facility.
- 6C: Children receiving special education and related services in the home.

According to IDEA Part C Annual Performance Reports, states must report on several indicators, including Indicator 6A, 6B, and 6C, which focus on the settings in which infants and toddlers receive services. Indicator 6A reports on the percentage of children receiving services in the home, 6B reports on services in community-based settings like childcare centers, and 6C captures services delivered in other settings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education 2023).

Illinois, along with many other states, continues to demonstrate a strong commitment to preschool inclusion, as reflected in its performance on Indicator 6 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Data from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) show that Illinois has consistently demonstrated high percentages for 6A, with over 90% of eligible children receiving services in their homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education 2023). However, Illinois tends to report slightly lower on 6B compared to national averages, suggesting fewer children receiving services in community settings. Illinois' performance on 6C remains low, which aligns with federal goals to limit service delivery in segregated or noninclusive environments.

Compared to other states, Illinois ranks above average on 6A and near the national average for 6B. These targets reflect Illinois' dedication to enhancing inclusive practices in early childhood education. The state's initiatives, such as the Preschool for All program and collaborations with organizations like the Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA), further underscore its leadership in promoting inclusive preschool environments. States such as Massachusetts and Colorado also show strong performance in integrating early intervention into natural and inclusive community settings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education 2023), which can serve as models for Illinois to further enhance service access and family engagement.

For the most current and detailed data on Illinois's performance on IDEA Indicator 6, stakeholders are encouraged to consult the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) or the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS). More information on State Performance Plans and Annual Performance Plans, as well as specific indicators can be found [here](#) in this training module from Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.

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Additional Resources

[Educational Rights and Responsibilities: Understanding Special Education in Illinois “THE PARENT GUIDE”](#) (Illinois State Board of Education, Special Education Department, 2020)

[Training Curriculum on Part B of IDEA, Building the Legacy/Construyendo el Legado](#) (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2020)

[Building the Legacy for Our Youngest Children with Disabilities, A Training Curriculum on IDEA’s Part C](#) (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2017)

[FERPA 101: For Local Education Agencies](#) (US Department of Education, 2024)

[Wright's Law](#) - Information about legal cases and information pertaining to special education.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Quality Counts

The need for high-quality childcare continues to be a topic of interest as more and more families enter the workforce and more and more children need care. Every week, families from all socioeconomic backgrounds drop their children off at some type of childcare. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), “In the United States, 76% of children ages three to four, receive education and care from someone other than a parent.” (NIEER 2002). With so many children needing childcare, researchers and policymakers are tasked with figuring out how to best support the next generation of preschoolers. In this chapter, we will address the need for high-quality in early care and education as means to reduce the achievement gap between children from low to high socioeconomic families. We will also compare standard industry practices to what the field of early care and education recognizes as high-quality practices. Lastly, we will review some of the current observation methods, tools and techniques that can be used to ensure programs are implementing quality practices.

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Describe how assessment for the purposes of program evaluation and accountability assessment can help teachers, administrators, and families determine to what extent high-quality early childhood and inclusive practices are taking place in a program and identify potential next steps.
2. Name at least two early childhood assessment tools used for the purposes of program evaluation and accountability, and describe these tools' methods used for data collection and scoring.
3. Describe several high-quality and developmentally appropriate practices that are commonly included as items in assessment tools used for the purposes of program evaluation and accountability.

[3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

[3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices](#)

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

[3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#)

[3.8: Conclusion and References](#)

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3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

Decades of research on early child development has determined that “When it comes to early care and education programs, quality is critical,” (Wechsler, Melnick, Maier & Bishop, 2016, p.1). It is suggested that thoughtfully designed preschool programs can impact and influence a child’s future learning outcomes. Not only are there short-term benefits, based on data collected from quantitative research projects (e.g. Perry Preschool, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers), there are long-term benefits as well. More specifically, children from low-income homes who attended high-quality preschool programs showed higher achievement scores - especially in math and reading, as compared to their counterparts who were not able to attend a quality preschool. Furthermore, children who were enrolled in high-quality programs were less likely to be placed in special education, less likely to be retained or held back a grade, and it was noted that they were more likely to graduate from high school. ^[5]

Unfortunately, due to limited funding opportunities and financial restraints, there are many families who cannot afford to send their child to a high-quality preschool. “This lack of access to high-quality early childhood education perpetuates the achievement gap, evidenced by the fact that only 48 percent of low-income children are ready for kindergarten, compared to 75 percent of moderated – or high-income children” (p. 3 Center for American Progress). This data reveals that the achievement gap is problematic on many levels. Moving forward we must consider how we, as advocates and educators, can lessen the achievement gap so that all children, no matter their socioeconomic status, can get a smart start. To find possible solutions to this dilemma, let’s take a closer look at and compare standard industry practices to what the field of early care and education regards as high-quality practices . ^[6]

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3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

As more and more children need childcare, families are faced with a tremendous task of finding “the right preschool program.” When choosing a center, some families may contemplate certain factors like cost and affordability, hours of operation and availability, and location. Some families, on the other hand, may consider the school philosophy, the education and experience of teachers, the environment and daily activities, as well as the curriculum model and guidance policies. As you can see, there are numerous possibilities to consider. Families must also decide on whether to send their child to a state-funded or faith-based program, a family childcare or a traditional preschool setting. No matter what type of program a family chooses, in the state of California all childcare centers must be licensed by the California Department of Social Services and comply with Community Care Licensing Title 22 regulations. For the purpose of this text, in order to demonstrate that all preschools are not alike, we will refer to “ standard industry practice ” as any state licensed childcare program and we will refer to “ high-quality practice ” as any childcare center that undergoes regular assessments using tools and techniques that are above and beyond the standard industry practice .

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3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

Unlike standard industry practices, high-quality practices place an emphasis on promoting positive child outcomes. The key to a high-quality program is contingent upon what happens inside the classroom environment. Let's examine how both process quality and structural quality work together to influence positive outcomes for children.

Process quality refers to the types of interactions that occur throughout the day between the teachers, children, families, and administrators. Process quality also considers the types of materials that are available for the children to use, as well as the activities that children engage in throughout their day. Lastly, process quality takes into account the health, well-being and safety of the children. Structural quality on the other hand, refers to the features and characteristics of a program. More specifically, the class size, teacher-to-child ratios, teacher qualifications and experiences, teacher pay scale, along with the allotted square footage for play space define quality. Although process quality is thought to have a more direct impact on child outcomes as compared to structural quality, researchers and leaders in the field of early care and education agree that process and structural indicators are interrelated, and when combined together they promote the highest quality experiences.

For example, when groups are smaller, teachers tend to have more positive, supportive, and stimulating interactions with children. Warm and nurturing interactions are directly linked to children's social competence and future academic success, and such interactions are essential to high quality. Early childhood teachers who are more highly qualified and have smaller groups can more effectively provide individualized, responsive learning opportunities. Finally, higher teacher wages have consistently been linked to higher process quality. ^[8]

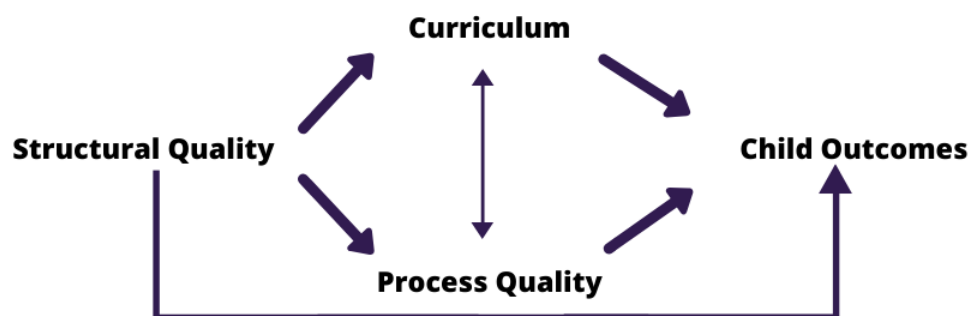


Figure 3.3.1: Structural Quality directly effects Child Outcomes ^[9]

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3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices

To legally operate a childcare program in California, a center must comply with certain licensing policies and procedures. These state regulations provide “a baseline standard and are primarily focused on protecting children from harm rather than on advancing child development and early learning,” (Workman & Ullrich, 2017, p. 3). In other words, Title 22 Regulations stipulate health and safety standards, space and square footage requirements, supervision standards, and teacher qualifications. Title 22 Regulations do not however, consider curriculum activities, age appropriate materials, or teacher-to-child interactions, nor does it address developmentally appropriate practices such as family culture and perspectives, child development theories, or principles and practices.

To ensure early childhood education programs are compliant with all state policies and procedures, a licensing analyst will conduct an annual inspection, or will evaluate a program as needed. Typically, the analyst will look at the center’s overall cleanliness and they will inspect both the indoor and outdoor environment to certify that the center is safe for the children. The analyst will confirm that the ratios are met, and that there is proper space and square footage available for each child to play and nap. The analyst will also conduct a spot check of the employee files to confirm teacher qualifications, and they will look through the children’s files to validate that the proper paperwork is signed and in complete order. To comply with state regulations and policies, a center director will need to download the California Code of Regulations, Title 22 administered by CDSS (Divisions 12 only) and follow all the mandated requirements. If any criteria are not met, the analyst will cite the program. The program will then be given a certain timeframe to rectify and correct the concern. The analyst will return to verify the problem has been fixed. Families who are considering a program can check the Community Care Licensing website to see if a center has received any “substantiated citations.” ^[7]

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3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

As mentioned above, the teacher plays a vital role in orchestrating high-quality practices. In high-quality classrooms, not only must teachers create a safe and nurturing space, they must intentionally set up the environment to support children's interests and individuality. California childcare programs serve a diverse population, therefore, an intentional teacher must also consider the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic status of each family enrolled in her class. The highly-qualified teacher has a deep understanding of child development, and with that knowledge she will provide appropriate materials and experiences to challenge the children in her care. In the chart below, we can see how teachers maintain high-quality practices.

Table 3.5.1: Classroom Environments

Physical environment	The overall design and layout of a classroom, including the learning centers and play spaces, the age appropriate materials, and the child size furnishings
Social environment	The interactions that occur within the classroom between teachers, children, family members, center staff and administration
Temporal environment	The routines and daily schedules, the timing, sequence, and length of play time, the time spent indoors and outdoors engaged in child-directed and teacher-directed activities

Here are some considerations to incorporate quality practices into your classroom to promote responsive caregiving while supporting the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of children:

Pin It! The Building Blocks of High Quality Early Childhood Education Programs ¹⁰

1. Early learning standards and curricula that address the whole child, are developmentally appropriate, and are effectively implemented.
2. Assessments that consider children's academic, social-emotional, and physical progress and contribute to instructional and program planning.
3. Well-prepared teachers who provide engaging interactions and classroom environments that support learning.
4. Ongoing support for teachers, including coaching and mentoring.
5. Support for English learners and students with special needs.
6. Meaningful family engagement.
7. Sufficient learning time.
8. Small class sizes with low student-teacher ratios.
9. Program assessments that measure structural quality and classroom interactions.
10. A well-implemented state quality rating and improvement system.

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3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

One of the hallmarks of high-quality practices is the practice of continuously monitoring and evaluating a program's overall effectiveness for the purpose of accountability. Therefore, in addition to complying with state licensing regulations, high-quality programs may utilize noted assessment tools and resources (e.g. ECERS, CLASS, QRIS, NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice) to evaluate their center and staff. To guide high-quality practices, early childhood educators often look to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to provide ethical pedagogy. NAEYC is a recognized professional organization committed to promoting quality early learning experiences for children, birth through age 8. Grounded by research and theory principles, NAEYC promotes best practices for children, families, teachers, administrators, stakeholders and policy makers. To ensure quality practices are being implemented, it is suggested that teachers follow NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Framework:

- Teachers encourage children to be active participants in their own learning
- Teachers set reasonable expectations based on what they know about a child's age and stage of development
- Teachers build on what children know using a variety of learning strategies, materials, meaningful experiences
- Teachers plan activities to support all aspects of development: social, emotional, physical and cognitive
- Teachers value each child's family, language, and cultural practices
- Teachers are aware of each child's interests, strengths, abilities and individual needs
- Teachers recognize play as a primary context in which young children learn
- Teachers establish warm, caring and respectful relationships with children, families and colleagues
- Teachers regularly assess the children's development and the environment, and they self-reflect on their own practices (Gordon and Browne, 2016, *Beginning Essentials in early childhood education* 3e)

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3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

One of the characteristics of a high-quality early childhood program is the practice of continuously monitoring children's development, along with the environmental setting and teacher interactions. By evaluating the overall performance in these key areas, teachers, administrators and families can reflect, make necessary changes and improvements to support all students and families. There are numerous tools on the market that evaluate program quality. For the purpose of this text we will focus on just a few tools that are highly recognized and most often used in California to monitor quality practices in preschool programs.

The Environment Rating Scales (ERS)

The Environment Rating Scale is a standardized assessment tool that can help caregivers, teachers, and administrators improve the quality of their program. The ERS measure process quality .

Process quality consists of the various interactions that go on in a classroom between staff and children, staff, parents, and other adults, among the children themselves, and the interactions children have with the many materials and activities in the environment, as well as those features, such as space, schedule and materials that support these interactions. Process quality is assessed primarily through observation and has been found to be more predictive of child outcomes than structural indicators such as staff to child ratio, group size, cost of care, and even type of care, for example child care center or family child care home . ^[11]

There are 4 Environment Rating Scales:

1. The Infant and Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) for programs serving young learners aged 6 weeks to 30 months
2. The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) for preschool programs serving children aged 3-5 years
3. The School-Age Child Environmental Rating Scale (SACERS) for afterschool programs serving children aged 5-12 years
4. The Family Child Care Environmental Rating Scale (FCCERS) for family childcare programs serving children aged 6 weeks to 12 years.

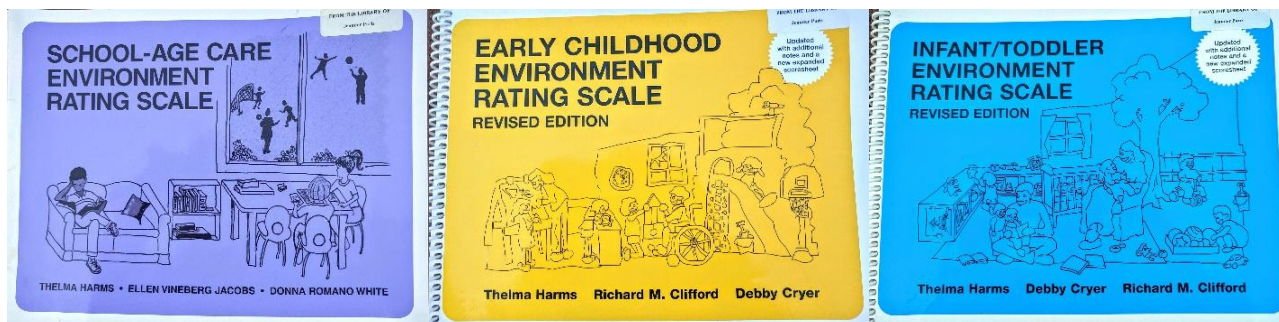


Figure 3.7.1: Rating Scale Texts ^[12]

Why Use Environment Rating Scales

The scales are used in a variety of ways including for self-assessment by center staff, preparation for accreditation, and voluntary improvement efforts by licensing or other agencies. For example, in the United States:

- Several states, including California , Massachusetts, Montana, Mississippi, Kansas, Oregon, Kentucky, New Mexico, Georgia, Florida, Wisconsin, and Nebraska have also initiated quality evaluation and improvement programs using our scales. Each state is tailoring its use of the scales to its individual needs and resources.
- The state of Arkansas has trained personnel, who do assessments and provide training and technical assistance so that childcare centers and homes can increase their quality of care. Another innovative feature of the Arkansas program is that parents who select childcare facilities with an average of 4.5 or higher on our scales are eligible for two times the state childcare tax exemption. Thus, both parents and providers are being rewarded for quality improvements that benefit the children.
- The state of Colorado uses the scales in a variety of program improvement and evaluation projects. For example, Denver has a quality improvement program that uses on site consultation and training based on scale scores. Many of the centers participating in this program serve poor and minority children and their families. The state of Colorado is currently considering a tiered reimbursement system using the scales.

- North Carolina also currently uses scale scores as part of their 5-star rated license system. Centers and family childcare homes are awarded either one or two stars based on compliance with licensing standards. Programs may voluntarily apply for an additional three stars based on a set of quality measures including the licensing compliance record, teacher and director education, and the levels of process quality as measured by the appropriate environmental scale. Only the lowest level of licensing is mandatory. However, an additional fee is paid to the provider of subsidized care for each additional star earned voluntarily.
- The Oklahoma 3-star tiered license incorporates an evaluation with the scales in the second tier as a basis for quality improvement, and provides technical assistance based on scores for meeting accreditation standards. Tiered reimbursement is a part of this system.
- Tennessee is now initiating a rated license system, based on North Carolina's experience. In their system, however, program evaluation is not voluntary, but is required yearly to create a "Report Card" that must be posted with the license so childcare consumers have access to reliable information on the quality of childcare they are using for their children. Tiered reimbursement will also be tied to scores on the scale.
- All the US military services have been using the scales routinely in their center and family childcare homes for program improvement and monitoring. The military child development system was recognized by Executive Order in 1998 for its high quality.
- Our environmental rating scales are widely used by programs as they prepare for accreditation. This is due to the fact that our scales use a format with detailed levels of quality that provides a blueprint for gradual change. The content of our scales is completely supportive of the various credentialing and accreditation programs.

The ERS Tool

As suggested by ERS, in order to provide high-quality care and education experiences to all children and their families, a childcare program must provide for the three basic needs all children have:

- Protection of their health and safety
- Building positive relationships
- Opportunities for stimulation and learning from experience

Let's take a closer look at how to use the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-3) for preschool programs serving children aged 3-5 years. The Scale consists of 35 items organized into 6 subscales: ^[13]

- Space and Furnishings
- Personal Care Routines
- Language and Literacy
- Learning Activities
- Interaction
- Program Structure

Within each subscale there are indicators that are arranged in a hierarchical order with basic needs at low levels and the more educational and interactional aspects at higher levels. The requirements for each indicator must be met before the next indicator is measured. If a requirement is not met, scoring then comes to a stop.

Scoring:

- 1 = inadequate
- 3 = minimal
- 5 = good
- 7 = excellent

Empirical Research

Empirical studies using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) tool have generally found positive associations between the quality of early childhood programs and child development.

The ECERS-R (1998) is the revised edition of the original ECERS (1980). It is currently being used in several major studies, including the Early Head Start Study (Mathematica Corporation), and Welfare, Children and Families: A Three City Study

(Columbia University, University of Chicago, and Harvard University). The original ECERS was used in the Head Start FACES study, in which over 400 classrooms are included nationwide. The preliminary results in all these studies show that the ECERS and the ECERS-R are performing very well.

Additionally, it should be noted that the ECERS and ITERS were used as the comprehensive quality measures in the National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989) and the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study (1995), the major studies of their time. The FDCRS was used in The Study of Children in Family Child Care and Relative Care (Galinsky, Howes, Kontos, & Shinn, 1994). In all of these studies, a relationship was found between higher scores on the ECERS and more positive child development outcomes in areas that are considered important for later school success. The effects of higher quality early childhood experiences have now been shown to last at least through the second grade of elementary school (Peisner-Feinberg, Burchinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan, Yazejian, Byler, Rustici, & Zelazo, 1999). Research is continuing to evaluate longer-lasting effects. ^[14]

ERS Strengths

The instrument has good test-retest reliability, high inter-rater reliability (Clifford et al., 2010), and many studies have demonstrated its predictive validity (Burchinal et al., 2008; Montes et al., 2005; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001). Furthermore, the results show that ECERS-R is a significant predictor of child development in two domains: physical health and well-being, and social competence.

ERS Limitation

While the ECERS-R is a useful tool to measure the quality of early childhood programs across various settings, there are some limitations. Because the Environmental Rating Scales were developed in the United States, the relevance to non-American cultural settings has been questioned (Dickinson, 2006; Mathers, Singler, & Karemaker, 2012). Some have criticized that the ITERS-R scale places too much emphasis on the structural aspects of childcare (Sanders & Howes, 2013; Vermeer et al., 2008), while others are concerned that the Rating Scales fail to measure the interactions between the teacher and children and families, which is considered to be key quality factors in childcare (Bisceglia, Perlman, Schaack, & Jenkins, 2009; Helmerhorst et al., 2014).

Although the Environment Rating Scales are highly regarded, there has also been some considerable criticism. For example, a closer look at the items in the ECERS-R reveals that some items may be less relevant than others in our study's setting—poor, rural villages in Indonesia. Item 27 outlines the provision of TV, video or computers for classroom activities. Item 3 describes the provision of soft furnishings such as carpeted space and cushions for children's relaxation and comfort. While all of these provisions would be great to have, they are often unfeasible in rural, resource-constrained environments. In over 3 weeks of field observation, we rarely saw soft furnishings—sitting on the floor for children and adults alike is the norm in rural Indonesia – even when soft furnishings are available. We did encounter one center with a computer lab during piloting of the ECERS-R but this was a state-of-the-art center where not one but three international donors had channeled funding. ^[15]

ECERS FAQ Find:

- When was the first ECERS tool published?
- Who typically uses the ECERS tool?
- Who administers the assessment tool?
- How can teachers prepare for an assessment?
- When was the last time the ECERS tool was updated?
- How many measures are there in the ECERS?

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

Research shows that all children benefit from high-quality instruction and classroom interactions, regardless of language status, race/ethnicity, or special needs (August & Shanahan, 2006; Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). When teachers provide individualized support and guidance to the children in their classrooms, they contribute to each child's social and emotional development, which has been linked to their overall physical development and academic achievement. The CLASS tool showcases various strategies that teachers can implement to promote quality interactions. It is important to note that class does not favor any curriculum model over another.

The CLASS tool differs from other measurement tools that may address the content of the physical environment, available materials, or a specific curriculum. Although the physical environment materials and curriculum are important, the CLASS tool focuses more on the context of how teachers directly interact, engage and communicate with the children in their classroom environment. CLASS measures cooperative and creative learning experiences and focuses on the teacher's role in allowing children to be active participants in their own learning. More specifically, CLASS promotes social justice and equity, and has "indicators" to assess how a teacher develops a sense of community and empathy for others. Not only must the teacher consider the tangible environmental elements, they must consciously incorporate quality interactions. Teachers must ask questions and engage in thoughtful conversations that emphasize back and forth dialogue rather than one and done responses. Teachers must extend the children's vocabulary and create opportunities where children can use their expressive language skills. Lastly, teachers must provide positive feedback to children throughout the day and allow children to make choices.

Why Use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

As advocates and educators, we know that engaging interactions and well-designed environments form the foundation for optimal learning to occur. High-quality preschool programs should strive to incorporate the following:

- well-managed and well-organized classrooms with clearly defined spaces
- support systems to enhance children's social and emotional development
- a variety of instructional materials that stimulate children's thinking and curiosity
- opportunities for authentic interactions and meaningful conversations
- a balance of teacher-directed activities and child-directed activities
- enhanced language and literacy implemented throughout the day
- opportunities for movement and classroom spaces that support kinesthetic learning

Research findings from over 3,000 classrooms found that children who were in classrooms that received higher CLASS ratings showed greater gains in social skill, language, early literacy, and math development. Furthermore, after a decade of research, crucial conclusions were made that suggest using the CLASS tool can not only improve the effectiveness of an individual classroom, it can also improve the program as well. Let's look at some reasons as to why you might want to use the CLASS tool:

1. Effective teacher-child interactions are an active and crucial ingredient for children's social and academic development.
2. Children in ECE settings are not consistently exposed to effective teacher-child interactions.
3. Initial evidence suggests thresholds for effective teacher-child interactions, as measured by CLASS, in promoting children's learning and development.
4. Quality improvement efforts that focus explicitly on teacher-child interactions maximize impacts for children.
5. Carefully designed and implemented professional development support can improve the quality of teacher-child interactions

The CLASS Tool

The CLASS Tool is divided into 3 Domains: Emotional Support; Classroom Organization; and Instructional Support. Each Domain has several Dimensions (see the chart below), and each Dimension has several Indicators that provide detailed descriptors of how a teacher should interact (Note: the indicators for each dimension are not listed in the chart below.)

Table 3.7.2: CLASS Tool Domains

Emotional Support	Classroom Organization	Instructional Support
1. Positive Climate 2. Negative Climate 3. Teacher Sensitivity 4. Regard for Student Perspective	1. Behavior Management 2. Productivity 3. Instructional Learning Formats	1. Concept Development 2. Quality of Feedback 3. Language Modeling 4. Literacy (optional)

Scoring

Scoring is based on a 7-point scale, with the "low range" being a score of 1 to 2, the "middle range" a score of 3 to 5, and the "high range" a score of 6 to 7. The higher the range in each dimension the better.

CLASS Strengths

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool is a systematic observation tool that can be used to measure the interactions between teachers and their children in typical classroom settings. The CLASS tool has also been used to assess classroom quality across diverse populations, including dual language learners (DLLs), children from migrant families, tribal populations, in addition to children with special needs and children with diverse cultural backgrounds (Downer et al., 2011). The CLASS tool is deemed both reliable and valid, and it provides preschool programs and individual classroom teachers with an opportunity to regularly monitor and evaluate themselves.

Formal assessments can be made by certified CLASS evaluators and the results are shared with the teacher and program with the intent of finding strategies on how to improve interactions. The tool can also be used informally. Teachers can review each domain, dimension and indicator, and then reflect on their own practices to find ways they can incorporate more intentional interactions.

CLASS Limitations

Even though every CLASS observer is formally certified, there will be small, systematic differences in their scoring. Some observers may tend to give slightly higher scores, while others may tend to be slightly more critical. Although slight differences fall within the threshold for “reliability,” inaccurate results have been noted. One other limitation is that there is little emphasis on structural quality. More specifically, CLASS does not assess the physical environment or materials, and it is not designed to review program safety.

Additional Methods, Tools and Techniques to Ensure High-Quality Practices

Program Accreditation

Both the [National Association for the Education of Young Children](https://www.naeyc.org/) (NAEYC) (link: <https://www.naeyc.org/>) and the [National Early Childhood Program Accreditation](https://www.naeyc.org/accreditation) (NECPA) ^[16] (link: <https://www.naeyc.org/accreditation>) are nationally recognized agencies that set a standard of excellence for overall program quality. Programs that pursue accreditation must meet key criteria expectations in areas such as “the learning environment, teacher and child interactions, staff qualifications, professional development, and family engagement” (Center for America, 2017, p. 6). Both NAEYC and NECPA offer training, technical assistance, and consulting services to support early care and education programs that not only want to meet but exceed standard industry practices. Accreditation is a voluntary endeavor that requires programs to undergo a self-study as they prepare for the validation process. Programs that achieve accreditation status must be re-assessed every three years to demonstrate a continued commitment to high-quality practices.

The Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

The Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early care and school-age care programs. ^[17] The main purpose of the QRIS is to improve and standardize the quality of care in all facilities in the state, and to make childcare more accessible and affordable for families. In California, the QRIS is used to:

- Assess program quality comparably across provider types (publicly and privately funded, centers and family childcare homes) throughout the state
- Align program standards with early learning and practitioner standards
- Support continuous quality improvement for participating programs and their staff
- Provide families with information about program quality to assist them in making informed choices . ^[18]

The Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS)

In the late 80's, Arnett released the Caregiver Interaction Scale (1989) to assess a global rating of caregiver sensitivity and responsiveness in both early care and education settings and family childcare environments. The tool focuses on caregiver / teacher emotional interactions and measures several items including sensitivity, harshness, detachment, and permissiveness. Items are rated on a 4-point scale. The scale has limitations as it captures only one aspect of process quality, and thus it is suggested that additional assessments be used to measure more structural dimensions.

NAEYC Position Statement on Importance of Environmental Assessments^[19]

The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education take the position that policy makers, the early childhood profession, and other stakeholders in young children's lives have a shared responsibility to:

- Construct comprehensive systems of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation guided by sound early childhood practices, effective early learning standards and program standards, and a set of core principles and values: belief in civic and democratic values; commitment to ethical behavior on behalf of children; use of important goals as guides to action; coordinated systems; support for children as individuals and members of families, cultures, and communities; partnerships with families; respect for evidence; and shared accountability.
- Implement curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, comprehensive, and likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children.
- Make ethical, appropriate, valid, and reliable assessment a central part of all early childhood programs. To assess young children's strengths, progress, and needs, use assessment methods that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily activities, supported by Professional development, inclusive of families, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes: (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning, (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and (3) helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions.
- Regularly engage in program evaluation guided by program goals and using varied, appropriate, conceptually and technically sound evidence to determine the extent to which programs meet the expected standards of quality and to examine intended as well as unintended results.
- Provide the support, Professional development, and other resources to allow staff in early childhood programs to implement high-quality curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation practices and to connect those practices with well-defined early learning standards and program standards.



Figure 3.7.2: In the right environment children thrive^[20]

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3.8: Conclusion and References

Research suggests that an enriched learning environment, along with meaningful interactions and experiences can significantly enhance a child's overall development (Center for American Progress, 2017). Not only do children deserve high-quality learning experiences, parents need the assurance of knowing that their children are in safe, healthy and nurturing environments. Unfortunately, providing high-quality early childhood education services can be particularly challenging especially for the estimated four million children who are living in poverty and considered at-risk. Thus, the achievement gap continues to be a concern and the quest for quality is ongoing. As early childhood educators, we must strive to regularly observe, collect data and assess our programs, and reflect on our teaching practices to be more proactive in our quest for quality. While a score is important to look at and improve on, it is not the end all, be all, it merely serves to guide our practices as it relates to a whole picture. Ongoing observation and documentation help to keep us informed of how to best serve the children and families in our care.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Observation and Documentation - The Key to Intentional Teaching

To provide children with a safe and nurturing learning environment and to maintain program effectiveness, teachers must incorporate observation, documentation, and assessment into their daily routines. To truly be effective, teachers must develop skills and strategies that are grounded in best practices. In this chapter, you will be presented with information that highlights how observation and documentation can be used as a key strategy to ensure intentional teaching. You will examine the initial steps to take to become a skilled observer, and you will reflect on how to objectively document the interactions that you see and the conversations that you hear. It is important to note that becoming a skilled observer takes time and practice, and that learning how to incorporate observation, documentation, and assessment into your regular routines and daily duties requires some thoughtful consideration.

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

- 1) Describe how observation and documentation are critical skills necessary to support children's development
- 2) Understand and be able to explain the difference between spontaneous and planned observations
- 3) Demonstrate objective observation writing, limiting use of bias and opinions
- 4) Use consideration of ethical guidelines when observing young children

[4.1: The Role of Observation](#)

[4.2: Becoming a Skilled Observer](#)

[4.3: Observations Can Be Spontaneous or Planned](#)

[4.4: Questions You May Want to Ask Yourself As You Plan Your Next Observation](#)

[4.5: The Role of Documentation](#)

[4.6: Objective Versus Subjective Observation Evidence](#)

[4.7: Recognizing Your Biases](#)

[4.8: Ethical Guidelines When Observing Children](#)

[4.9: Observation and Documentation Dos and Don'ts](#)

[4.10: Conclusion and References](#)

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4.1: The Role of Observation

Observations are conducted every day in early childhood classroom environments. Teachers are constantly surveying the environment and completing safety checks to make sure the equipment and materials are safe for the children to use. Teachers also look for signs of illness or injury everyday to ensure their children are healthy enough to participate in program activities. Beyond the standard safety check and health screening, teachers have many other important tasks and duties that they must do in order to maintain a copacetic classroom environment. Intentional teachers use their observations to plan and implement curriculum, set up engaging learning environments, monitor the children's social interactions, track behaviors, communicate with families, and assess each child's progress and development. Essentially, observations help teachers be more professionally responsible.

By conducting regular observations intentional teachers can:

1. Evaluate program effectiveness
2. Evaluate teacher effectiveness
3. Make improvements to ensure quality practices
4. Plan and implement developmentally appropriate curriculum
5. Measure and assess a child's development
6. Develop respectful family partnerships
7. Understand the cultural practices and family structure
8. Select effective learning strategies to support and accommodate the diverse needs of children
9. Ensure ethical conduct and professional standards of practice
10. Teach with confidence

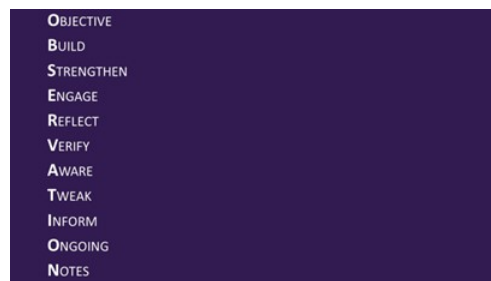


Figure 1.1: COC OER

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Pin It! Observation

Observation is defined as "the process of gathering information about objects and events using senses of sight, smell, sound, touch and taste, noticing specific details or phenomena that ordinarily might be overlooked" (CDE, 2016, p.64).

If we want to understand children, we must first watch them and listen to them. Then, we must try to make sense of what we observed and give it meaning. The role of observation is to provide teachers with the information and evidence they will need to make informed decisions on how to best support the children in their care. With each observation, you will get a glimpse into a child's developing mind. Not only will you see a child's personality emerge, but you will also be able to see what a child can do. As you watch your children, you will see how they problem solve when conflicts arise and how they cope with the stress from being in a group setting. You will learn about their individual needs and their cultural practices. When you watch children closely, their interests and abilities are revealed. With each observation, you will gain useful insight that will help you become an intentional teacher.

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4.2: Becoming a Skilled Observer

To truly observe a child, you must be present, knowledgeable, inquisitive, and intentional. With every observation, you will sharpen your skills as you learn how to effectively gather objective evidence and detailed data.

Be present. To capture all the individual mannerisms, subtle social nuances, nonverbal body language, and dynamic conversations that occur throughout the day, you must be attentive, focused, and ready to go at any given moment. Children move fast. When we blink, we are bound to miss some little detail or precious moment; that's a given. Being present takes considerable effort and careful planning.

Be knowledgeable. Understanding the core concepts of early childhood education is extremely important if you are to set reasonable expectations and plan developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Familiarizing yourself with child development theories will help you understand and appreciate why children do what they do. Learning about the key principles in early care and education will provide you with a solid foundation and a wide range of instructional strategies to support a child's development.

Be inquisitive. Think of yourself as a researcher. Your primary mission is to investigate the children in your care by routinely gathering evidence, using a variety of observation methods and tools. As a good researcher you will need to ask some thoughtful questions. These questions will guide you as you plan purposeful observations and as you select your method of observation. Here are some sample questions you may ask yourself: What activities interest Max? How many times did Stevie hit today? What skills did Hazel master today with this activity, and what skills need further support? How long did Zoey stay engaged while playing in the sandbox? What milestones will this activity support? By asking thoughtful questions, you will learn more about the children in your care and you will do a better job at supporting each child's individual needs. Rather than fixating on a child's behavior, in time you will begin using focused observations to try and figure out the reasons why a child acts the way they do.

Be intentional. As you organize learning experiences, set up the classroom and outside environment, assess children's developmental progress, engage in activities, and interact with your children and families, you must have a thoughtful plan of action in place: "Intentional teaching means that everything you do as a teacher has a specific goal and purpose" (Gordon & Browne, 2016 p. 103). Even as spontaneous situations arise, intentional teachers must make the most of teachable moments. Intentional teachers conduct regular observations and gather objective documentation data to be able to justify the actions they take, the plans they generate, and the assessments they make.

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4.3: Observations Can Be Spontaneous or Planned

Spontaneous observations occur all the time. Whether teachers are actively engaged with their children during an activity or in the background cleaning up after an activity, teachers have numerous opportunities to see and hear some wonderful developments as they randomly occur. According to Piaget, children require long uninterrupted periods of play and exploration so that they can discover things for themselves. If we truly believe that children are capable of socializing, problem solving, and creating complex systems with rules, then we can successfully use spontaneous observations to capture a child's development as it unfolds naturally.

As intentional teachers, we can also appreciate when teachable moments arise unexpectedly. These golden moments are noteworthy. For example, as we witness a child attempting to master a milestone, we may provide some verbal support or guidance to scaffold the child's learning. For example, when Abraham is becoming frustrated with not being able to get a piece of his puzzle to fit, a teacher might ask, "What happens when you turn the piece around?" During spontaneous situations, we must remember to simultaneously make mental notes so that we can later write down and reflect on a more formal plan of action that can be used later to help the child achieve their developmental goals.

Let's review the advantages and disadvantages associated with spontaneous observations.

- **Advantages:** Being in the moment allows you to enjoy the children, and children appreciate your presence. When you are present, you can celebrate a child's success or provide positive reinforcements to help them master major milestones. While being spontaneous, you can focus on the child's interests and pose thoughtful questions to extend and enrich their learning experience. When a teacher keeps a low profile, a child is less likely to be self-conscious or nervous.
- **Disadvantages:** The longer you wait to document your spontaneous observation evidence, the harder it will be to remain objective and recall the vital details, which is important when tracking behaviors or assessing development. Also, the more time that passes, the more difficult it will be to access accurate data. For example, by not documenting the children's dialogue or capturing their key quotes in a timely manner, you may find it difficult to remember their actual word choices and use of vocabulary, which is essential for assessing a child's expressive language development.

Let's now discuss focused or **planned observations**. Becoming a skilled observer takes practice. At first, you may be slightly overwhelmed with trying to incorporate an official observation time into your already busy schedule. You may struggle with finding that delicate balance between knowing when to interact with the children and realizing when to step back and observe. Once you do observe, you might be surprised by the amount of evidence you have collected on each child. What's more, you will have to sift through all the evidence, and that can be both time-consuming and exhausting. Since your time is limited and you cannot possibly observe everything, incorporating a planned observation will help you navigate through your busy day, and you will be able to gather more specific evidence (Gronland & James, 2013). In the next section, the finer points of observations are detailed.

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4.4: Questions You May Want to Ask Yourself As You Plan Your Next Observation

When should I observe?

From the moment a child walks into their classroom until the time they leave, opportunities to learn are occurring. Some observations will happen spontaneously, while others will be scheduled. To see a child's full potential, you will need to observe at various times throughout the day. For example, some children are slow to warm up to peers, and it may take them some time to get acclimated before they can fully engage and interact with others. If a child is slow to warm, the morning drop-off may not be the best time to document their social development. You will want to track them throughout the day, at various times (including transition times and snack/meal times), to get a full picture of who they are and what they can do.

Where should I observe?

Many times observations are centered on structured, teacher-directed activities. This is, in fact, a perfect time to witness what major milestones a child has mastered. However, observing a child while they are exploring in the dramatic play area (*inside*) or while they are in the sandbox area (*outside*) can prove to be just as enlightening. During child-directed play or open exploration, you will no doubt be able to document many developmental skills--especially how they communicate, cooperate, solve dilemmas, and create. Because children can play and learn differently while they are inside as compared to when they are outside, it is necessary to observe in both environments. Likewise, it is important to observe in all activity areas and play spaces.

What observation method should I use?

Use a variety of methods to record and document the children. You will want to "try out" several tools and techniques to find your "go-to" method. Because each tool has a specific purpose or focus, using a variety of methods will provide you with sound documentation data to better understand the whole child's development. Note: In the next chapter, you will examine the various tools and techniques more closely.

Who should I observe?

You will want to observe each child as individuals and you will want to track group interactions. Becoming aware of who is in your class is necessary if you are going to create a caring classroom community, and respectful learning environment. Look for those who are the leaders in your group; find out who needs more one-to-one support and who are your helpers; watch for who plays together. This insight can help you organize peer scaffolding opportunities, which can free up some of your time. As a gentle reminder, sometimes we connect with certain children for one reason or another, and other times, a child may challenge us. Either way, we need to regularly observe each child with an open mind and an open heart, and we need to look at children with a clear lens that is free of bias. Each child needs your attention; each child has unique gifts; and each child needs your support.

What is the focus of my observation? What am I looking for?

With focused observations, there is usually a specific goal in mind. For example, you might want to know what milestones a child has mastered. For that, you would use a developmental checklist to "check off" all the skills the child was observed doing. Maybe you want to learn what the child's interests are and what they like to play with. For that, you can use a frequency count to tally up all the areas and activities the child used during that observation. Keep in mind that you can observe several skills and competencies across multiple domains during one observation. For example, one day you might set out a math activity and the children are expected to create patterns using colorful beads and pipe cleaners. While they work and play, you can listen to the children's conversations as they describe the patterns they are making. During the activity, you can note their fine motor development based on how well they string the beads onto the pipe cleaner, and you can see how they shared space and materials with their peers. Although this was a math activity, many other areas of development can be observed.

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4.5: The Role of Documentation

One of the cornerstones of a high-quality early care and education program is the practice of observing, documenting and assessing children's development. According to NAEYC (2020), in order to make formative decisions that will guide what goes on in the classroom, there needs to be an organized system in place to collect information. When we record our observations and collect data, we “hold in memory the actions, nonverbal communication, or comments that seem to be significant to children's thinking” (California Preschool Program Guidelines, 2015 p. 46). When we document children's learning and collect key artifacts, we create tangible evidence that we can share with the children and their families, along with administrators and stakeholders. There are many ways you can record and document children's learning. In fact, you should attempt to utilize several methods as part of your regular observation routines.

To collect and record data you can use the following methods:

- running records
- anecdotal notes
- checklists
- frequency counts
- learning stories
- time or event samples
- work samples
- taking photos, videotaping, or audio recordings.

To Store Your Documentation

To safely store your collected data, you will need to have an organized system in place. Portfolios are a popular strategy used by intentional teachers. To create a portfolio, you can use a binder or notebook, a file or accordion-style folder, or a cardboard box. As you collect observation evidence for each child, it is vital that you date everything so you can organize it chronologically. This will help you track each child's progress throughout the school year more efficiently. Portfolios help you construct a well-rounded and authentic picture of each child in your class. Knowing the “whole child,” you are better equipped to build on each child's individual interests, and you are more apt to plan developmentally appropriate activities.

Each child should have their own portfolio. A well-organized portfolio will contain observations and artifacts of children's work that are collected regularly throughout the school year. It is recommended that you include some type of documentation that highlights each developmental domain. For example:

- **Gross Motor:** Take photographs of a child while they are engaged in outside activities like running, jumping, climbing, riding a bike, or playing in the sandbox.
- **Fine Motor:** Keep a checklist of when your child learns to button, zip, and tie their shoes. Include work samples of their cutting, coloring, painting, and samples of emergent writing.
- **Social-Emotional:** Write anecdotal notes when a child engages in open-ended, child-directed play. Take note of how they share and cooperate with others. Do a frequency count to see which centers the child chooses to spend their time in and tally their play patterns to see if they prefer to play alone or with others.
- **Cognitive:** Chart a science experiment and take photos. Photograph a completed puzzle. Use a video camera to record a child as she builds a block bridge. And, as she explains her process--if she had to figure out all the steps to take so the bridge wouldn't fall down, be sure to record that too.
- **Literacy and Oral language:** Save writing examples to track how the child writes their name. Include illustrations of stories they love and the stories they write themselves. Write down quotes in your running record or make audio files of conversations during circle time.
- **Creative expression:** Video your child while playing in the dramatic play area or while performing a dance during music and movement. Photograph a clay creation, painting, or block tower.

To be clear, it isn't the amount of documentation you collect for each portfolio that matters, it's the quality of information you gather. Portfolios tell a story of the whole child. There should be a beginning, middle, and end. Each work sample, anecdotal note,

checklist, frequency count, and learning story should be used to showcase how a child processes information, develops relationships, and learns while playing.

To Document Children's Learning

Whether you collect evidence through spontaneous or planned observations, you will use your documentation to ultimately assess a child's learning, growth, and development. With well-organized documentation, intentional teachers can effectively communicate with a child's family, using the evidence and artifacts they have collected over time. Families appreciate being able to see their child's progression and how they interact with others. Families also enjoy seeing the types of activities their child engages in during a typical day at school. Here are a few ways documentation can be used to showcase a child's learning, growth, and development:

- rating scales and formal developmental assessments
- daily progress reports
- documentation boards.

Pin It! Ten Teacher Tips When Gathering Your Documentation

1. Date – this is key in tracking development over time.
2. Time – start time and end time.
3. Setting – note the location (indoor or outdoor; center or play area).
4. Purpose – what is the intended goal.
5. Note the child (or children) involved in the activity.
6. Record only the facts – write down exactly what you see and hear.
7. Be as concise (to the point) as you can.
8. Record the facts in the order in which they occur.
9. Be descriptive and provide vivid details – create a visual picture so others can “see” what is happening.
10. Be specific and avoid vague or general terms – this is helpful when you go back to review your data.

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4.6: Objective Versus Subjective Observation Evidence

Intentional teachers must learn how to write objective observations. As you observe, it is best to write down all that you see and hear, and report just the facts. It takes practice to learn how to separate facts from opinions. Here are some helpful tips for you to review.

Table 4.6.1: Objective Observations vs. Subjective Observations

Objective Observations	Subjective Observations
Objective observations are based on what we observed using our senses. We record exactly what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell.	Subjective observations are often influenced by our past events, personal experiences and opinions, and can be biased based on our cultural backgrounds.
Objective information is based on the facts we gather. If we don't see it, we don't report it. We report only details and provide vivid descriptions.	Subjective information is based on our opinions, assumptions, personal beliefs, prejudiced feelings, or can be based on suspicions, rumors, and guesses.
Results are more likely to be valid and reliable from child to child.	Results are often inconsistent and vary from child to child.
Objective terms that can be used: seems to be, appears to...	Subjective terms to avoid: just, because, but, always, never, can't, I think, happy, smart, helpful, pretty, angry, shy, likes, loves, hates, sad.

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4.7: Recognizing Your Biases

Google the word *bias* and this is what pops up: “prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.”

Biases, we all have them. Biases stem from our upbringing. Every interaction and every experience we have had has shaped who we are. To some degree, our biases influence our beliefs and behaviors, they sway our attitudes, and they affect our personalities. Because our biases are so ingrained into who we are, it would be unrealistic to simply say “ignore your bias.” Therefore, a valuable exercise might be to do a self-check and examine your own biases. Look for those biases that are “triggers.” More specifically, think about the behaviors, temperamental traits, and moods that make you feel uncomfortable, frustrated, or annoyed.

It is important to note that we might not be fully aware of all our biases. For example, when a child says, “Give me some milk!” Our first response might be “Ummm, how do you ask?” We might not realize that manners (or lack of them) can make us react in a judgmental way. What’s important to recognize is that how we feel about the child’s behavior can taint how we see them. What’s more, our biases can influence how we gather our observation evidence. As intentional teachers, we have to recognize our biases so we can treat all children with the respect that they deserve.

According to NAEYC’s Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment, P-1.3— We shall not participate in practices that discriminate against children by denying benefits, giving special advantages, or excluding them from programs or activities on the basis of their sex, race, national origin, immigration status, preferred home language, religious beliefs, medical condition, disability, or the marital status/family structure, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs or other affiliations of their families (NAEYC, 2011, p. 3).

So as not to lose our objectivity, it is important to keep an open heart, an open mind, and a clear lens. Rather than letting a child’s behavior trigger you, look beyond their behavior, look beyond your bias. Focus on collecting objective observation evidence and use that data to reflect on what might be causing that behavior. Consider ways that you can support the child through redirection, modeling, scaffolding or positive reinforcements. As intentional teachers, one of our primary roles is to empower children, and to build meaningful relationships by creating warm, caring environments (Epstein and Sanders, 2006).

Pin It! Common Mistakes to Avoid When Writing Observation Evidence

- **Drawing Conclusions:** Billie can’t do anything by himself because he is the youngest in a large family, and they do everything for him; Sharon’s parents are getting a divorce, so she is sad.
- **Making Assumptions:** Annie never shares; Denise always hits Thomas.
- **Labeling:** Rosie is mean; Jeff is such a good boy.
- **Comparing:** Tommy can’t ride the bike as well as Sam; Zoey was the best listener at circle time.
- **Focusing on Feelings or Emotions:** Max looks so sad today; Jax looks so happy as he slides down the slide.
- **Adding Opinions:** Martha really likes playing dress up, she is in the dramatic play area every day; Suki is shy and never says anything during circle time.

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4.8: Ethical Guidelines When Observing Children

Every day, teachers observe, record, and capture essential moments in a child's development. The evidence and artifacts that are gathered are then used to plan curriculum and assess development. Although we have highlighted the importance of gathering work samples and observation evidence as a key element to be an intentional teacher, we must also consider the perspective of the child. In the article "Who Is Watching? Thinking Ethically About Observing Children," authors Mehan and Moore (2011) highlight some of the ethical tensions that can arise within early childhood settings when trying to balance the rights of children, the responsibilities of teachers, and the role of a student who is training to be a future teacher.

In most classrooms, a typical day includes teachers grabbing their cameras to take snapshots of the children in their care so that they will have ample documentation. Consider this: does the teacher's presence change the context of the child's experience? Does the thought of being monitored make the child behave any differently? How does the child feel about having their picture taken? Are teachers becoming overly concerned about capturing children in precious moments, rather than being engaged in teachable moments? As a student who is learning to observe and document a child's development, it is important for you to consider the following guidelines when observing children:

- Take every precaution to maintain confidentiality and to ensure privacy.
- Remember to ask for permission to take photographs of children and their work.
- Understand that children have the right not to take part in activities.
- Be respectful and keep a reasonable amount of space between you and the child so as not to interfere with their play and learning.
- Be attuned to children's body language, temperament, and styles of communication.
- See each child as a unique individual who has their own perspective, set of feelings, interests, and way of socializing, along with their own cultural context, belief system, and values.
- Be upfront and inform children about the purpose of your observation visit if you are approached.
- Share information with the child about what you have observed when appropriate.
- Write quotes down just as they were said without adding context, or trying to rationalize what the child may have meant.
- Be aware that photos and observation data should be collected in a non-intrusive manner.
- Ensure that observation evidence and photos are used only for the purposes intended.
- Handle photos and data with care and sensitivity, and always store information securely.
- Realize that a child's reactions, behaviors, and conversations may not be what you expect, and therefore you should refrain from being judgmental or tainted by your cultural biases.

By following these guidelines, you are providing the children you observe with the respect they deserve while ensuring their dignity and safety. The centers and programs where you are observing are trusting you to act with integrity while you are at their site observing their children. Lastly, families will appreciate that you have their child's best interest at heart.



Figure 1.8.1 : Observing the world through a different lens.

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4.9: Observation and Documentation Dos and Don'ts

Whether performing a planned or spontaneous observation, here are some helpful tips to ensure you are recording quality evidence.

Table 1.9.1: Observation and Documentation Dos and Don'ts

Observation and Documentation Dos	Observation and Documentation Don'ts
1. Note the date, time, and setting. 2. Note the child (or children) involved (and adults, if any). 3. Record only the facts – in a concise manner. 4. Record the facts in order as they occur and exactly as you see it. 5. Collect vivid details and quotes. 6. Use a variety of observation methods. 7. Observe with an open heart, an open mind, and a clear lens, free from bias. 8. Be attentive and alert, and use all your senses. 9. Note what the child CAN DO rather than what they cannot. 10. Keep a low profile and respect the children's space while they are playing.	1. Do not interfere or pressure the children to perform. 2. Do not assume or state your opinion while recording evidence. 3. Do not record anything you do not see. 4. Do not label behaviors, actions or feelings. 5. Avoid using subjective, biased, or judgmental terms. 6. Avoid using exaggerations and conditional words. 7. Do not summarize information. 8. Avoid using generalizations or vague terms.

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4.10: Conclusion and References

To become a skilled observer takes time and practice (Gronlund and James 2013). You will need to figure out your rhythm so that you can incorporate observation and documentation into your regular routine. As an intentional teacher, you will want to plan systematic observations so that you can document each child's unique qualities, interests, developmental strengths and needs, as well as uncover their cultural practices, approaches to learning, and play preferences throughout the school year. As you gather evidence, you will want to be as objective as you can be, and you will have to recognize your biases. As you collect your documentation on each child, you will want to organize it in a chronological manner and store it safely. Lastly, be sure to observe every child in your class; be aware that some children may catch your attention more than others for one reason or another. In the next chapter, we will examine several observation tools and techniques that you will want to use as part of your regular observation routine to ensure high-quality practices.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Using Authentic Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques to Gather Evidence

Observing children as they play, learn, and socialize with others is an integral part of every early educator's daily routine. According to the California Preschool Program Guidelines, when early caregivers and preschool teachers “regularly observe and document brief, subtle moments of children’s learning through play, those records help parents and others understand how useful and important play is in helping children to learn and grow” (CA Department of Education 2015, p. 32–33). In this chapter, we will examine the various observation methods, tools, and techniques that can be used to gather information about the children in your care. Although teachers may favor one method over the other, it is recommended that teachers utilize several methods, tools, and techniques so that they can gather a well-rounded perspective of each child. To truly understand the “whole child” it is important to realize that observation and documentation is an ongoing process that begins with gathering baseline data.

When used for the purposes of assessment, observational methods and techniques are often considered *authentic assessment* methods. Authentic assessment methods are often considered developmentally appropriate methods of conducting assessment in early childhood programs (Scott-Little and Reschke 2022), as they are conducted within natural, play-based activities and environments with individuals who are familiar with the child (Pretti-Frontczak, et al. 2023).

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Demonstrate the ability to use observation and assessment as a means of evaluating student capabilities and developing a deeper understanding how students learn in order to meet state and program requirements.
2. Describe methods to evaluate child progress, including formative and summative assessments.
3. Distinguish between various methods of gathering information about a child's strengths, needs, and interests using authentic assessment or observation.
5. Identify variables to consider when selecting and designing assessments.

[5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#)

[5.2: Understanding the Child](#)

[5.3: Let's Get Started](#)

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

This chapter was adapted from [Observation and Assessment in Early Childhood Education](#) by Gina Peterson and Emily Elam, [Chapter 3: Using Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques to Gather Evidence](#).

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5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data

In order to truly measure the learning, growth, and development of a child over time, there needs to be a *point of reference*, or a starting point. Baseline data provides a starting point. As recommended by the California Department of Education, in the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), to establish a baseline, children should be observed “within 60 calendar days of enrollment and [formally assessed] every 6 months thereafter” (DRDP, 2015, p. ii). More specifically, any time a child starts your program, or any time you introduce a new concept, topic or theme, it would be beneficial to gather baseline data. With each observation the goal is to track - ***What the child can do***. Then, as we review each observation, we further consider ***what the child has the potential to do***. Knowing specific details about how the child responds to the activities we have planned, and how the child is interacting with their peers, allows intentional teachers to make informed decisions that are in the best interest of the child. Baseline data allows us to create individualized activities and enriched learning opportunities and set up engaging environments where each child can feel empowered, challenged and well cared for.

Here is an example:

Aaron is 3.5 years old and this is his first time in preschool. To see whether Aaron can write his name, you would set out writing materials (markers or crayons, paper and possibly stencils), and you would observe Aaron at the writing center. To gather baseline data, you could use an Anecdotal Note to record how Aaron holds the markers – is he using the palmer grasp or the pincher grasp? Is he using his right or left hand? You would also want to note what Aaron created - did he write his name, draw a picture or scribble? If Aaron scribbled, he might not be ready to use lined paper to write his name or to journal a story. Rather than planning an activity that would require Aaron to write between the lines, it may be more beneficial to plan activities that would help him further develop his fine motor skills. Perhaps you would set out activities that would build his pincher grasp like play dough or stringing beads. Once you observe Aaron’s progression and his “signs of readiness”, then you would reintroduce writing between the lines.

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5.2: Understanding the Child

Many of the same tools and techniques you use to gather baseline data, you will continue to use to support the whole child. This includes screening, planning curriculum, and assessing development. Every observation you complete provides valuable information that you can use to be more intentional and more responsive. When we observe the children in our care, we can learn about their:

- interests, abilities and preferences
- developmental skill level (cognitive, language, social, emotional, physical)
- how they strategize in social situations
- how they approach learning opportunities
- personality and temperament

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5.3: Let's Get Started

Whether you are doing a planned observation, or you decide to do a spontaneous observation, you will need some essentials. An intentional teacher is a prepared teacher, and here are a few things you will need:

1. Something to write on – paper, sticky notes, color coded index cards, clipboard, notebook
2. Something to write with – colored ink pens, sharpie markers
3. Something to record with – photo camera, video camera, tape recorder, printer
4. Something to store your documentation in – a filing cabinet, accordion file folder, portfolio
5. Blank observation tool templates – checklists, frequency counts, ABC, anecdotal notes
6. Some extras – tape, stickers, paper clips, stapler, batteries, dictionary

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5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

No single observation can give you all the information you will need about a child's development. In order to truly understand a child's unique attributes, preferences, personality and strengths, you must observe them consistently, using several documentation tools and techniques. Each observation method has strengths and limitations. In this section, we will review some of the more commonly used techniques and tools that teachers use to gather objective observation evidence: Running Record; Checklists; Frequency Count; Anecdotal Record; Work Sample; Learning Story; and Technology.



Figure 5.4.1: Notetaking is one of the oldest forms of recording observations. (Public Domain; [Glenn Carstens-Peters](#) from [Unsplash](#))

Running Record

One of the oldest observation methods used in early child education is the Running Record. Running Records are considered by some as an “informal method” of observation as compared to Narrative Description or Specimen Records which are considered to be a more “formal method” of collecting data. The primary difference between the two methods is that with a Running Record, evidence is gathered in a more spontaneous (informal) manner as it occurs, whereas with a Narrative Description a (formal) plan would be arranged in advance, prior to the observation. More specifically, you would schedule a day, time and setting, you would select a specific child or group of children, and you would decide on the purpose, reason or focus of your observation (e.g. cognitive skills, social interactions, play patterns). Both methods provide rich, detailed evidence and both methods provide written accounts of everything you see and hear a child doing during a specific timeframe (Bentzen, 2009).

For the purpose of this text, we will use the term Running Record and recommend that you, as an intentional teacher, conduct Running Records (whether spontaneous or planned, informal or formal) as part of your regular or routine observations. The primary goal for using a Running Record is to “obtain a detailed, objective account of behavior without inference, interpretations, or evaluations” (Bentzen, 2009, p.112). You will know you have gathered good evidence when you can close your eyes and you can “see” the images in your mind as they are described in your Running Record (Bentzen, 2009).

Collecting Your Data

All you need is time, paper and a pen to gather your observation evidence. The goal with a running record is to write down everything you see and hear - exactly as it occurs, without adding any comments or attaching any opinions. As the saying goes, “just the facts, ma’am!” With the Running Record format, not only will you highlight children's behaviors, you will record the “setting, situation and sequence” in which the behavior occurred. Be as descriptive as possible and yet be as concise as possible. Children move quickly, so you must write quickly. When conducting a running record, you need to be out of ratio. You are to step back and observe from a distance. Do not interfere with the child's natural play, do not ask questions and do not run after them. Be as invisible as possible.

Organizing your Data

As you collect rich, detailed data throughout the school year, you will begin to recognize patterns of development, and you will see each child's unique attributes, personalities, and abilities as they emerge. Be sure to date all your running records; having 12-24 children in your classroom can add up to a lot of running records. You will need to store your running records safely in a portfolio or file folder. When it comes time to assess a child's development, you will be able to look back and review all the evidence you have collected and to monitor the child's progress over time.

Note: A Running Record is an ideal observation method for “students”. Teachers may not always have the time or staff coverage to conduct a Running Record.

Table 5.4.1: Running Record

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Provides detailed data about the who, what, where, and when 2. Evidence is documented as it occurs, in a sequence 3. Provides objective and descriptive evidence 4. Appropriate for gathering baseline information about the child's interests, abilities and skill level 5. Ideal for tracking a child's development over time 6. Less structured, more free flowing 7. Evidence can be gathered formally or informally 8. Interpretations and reflections can be added later	1. Time consuming 2. May be difficult to keep up and follow along as children move quickly from one activity to another 3. Not a practical technique for teachers who are in ratio 4. Behaviors may not be typical for that observation day as compared to other days

Let's Practice Gathering Evidence

Example 1:

Running Record: On 7/2/2019, Jorge played in the sandbox for 20 minutes.

What did you "see" with this example? What was the setting, situation and sequence of events?

What did you learn about Jorge?

Was the evidence objective? Was the evidence descriptive?

Let's try again.

Example 2:

Running Record: 7/2/2019. Time: 10:10am

During outside play and exploration, the following activities were available: bikes, sandbox, sensory table with goop, hula hoops, balls and a reading area with a basket of books. Jorge played in the sandbox for 20 minutes. With his left hand, Jorge dug a hole using a shovel. Jorge asked Julissa if he could have the dinosaur, "When you are finished, can I have the dinosaur for my cave?" Julissa handed Jorge the dinosaur and said, "Can I see?" Jorge nodded his head up and down.

At 10:30am, the teacher announced that it was time to clean up. Jorge stood up, dropped his shovel, ran over to the door and got in line. While in line, Jorge waved his hands and said "Come on Max. Come on. Here. Come here." Max ran over and stood next to Jorge in line.

What did you "see" with this example? What was the setting, situation, and sequence of events?

What did you learn about Jorge?

Was the evidence objective? Was the evidence descriptive? ^[22]

Running Record Template #1

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Setting:

Activity Area:

Who did you observe:

Running Record

Running Record Template #2

Date:
Start Time:
End Time:
Setting:
Activity Area:
Who did you observe:

Running Record	Interpretation
----------------	----------------

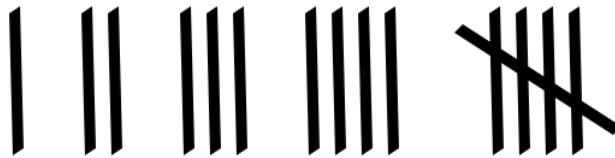


Figure 5.4.2: When is a frequency count used? Whenever you need to tally and record how many times a behavior is occurring. ^[23]

Frequency Counts (Time or Event Sampling)

A Frequency Count is an informal observation method that is used to gather information about a child's interests, social interactions, play patterns, and temperamental traits. As the teacher observes the children at play, a tally mark is made every time the noted behavior or action occurs within a set timeframe. Frequency Counts are also used to track undesirable or challenging behaviors, as well as ideal or positive behaviors.

Collecting your data

To create a Frequency Count, you must first decide on what social interactions, behaviors, interest areas, or types of play you want to monitor. You may decide to track your child during one focused activity or timeframe, or you may map out what a typical day might look like for your child and track all the interactions and experiences they engage in throughout the day. Either way, as you observe your child, you will make a tally mark every time they play in a specified area or display one of the action items as listed on your Frequency Count.

Here are some examples of how you might use a Frequency Count to gather data:

1. Sue has been hitting a lot lately and displaying other challenging behaviors . You will want to track how many times she hits in a typical day, along with any other challenging behaviors. You will also want to track where the incidents are occurring – are there more incidents while inside the classroom or are things happening during outside play? You will want to look at when the incidents are occurring most often– are there more incidents earlier in the day or later in the day? You may want to observe what is happening at drop-off time, mealtime and at naptime. Lastly, you may want to track who Sue is socializing with and how she plays with others. Does Sue display a consistent play pattern (parallel play, cooperative play, onlooker play)?
2. Thomas is a new student and his mother wants to know how he is doing. You may want to observe which centers Thomas goes to most often throughout the day and track his interests. You may also want to track whether he plays alone or with other children.
3. You and a child in your class are constantly butting heads . How can you create a supportive environment and provide a “goodness of fit?” You may need to track the child's temperamental traits and observe how the child approaches activities and how they respond to social situations.

Organizing Your Data

After you have collected all the data for that timeframe, count the tally marks. What can you interpret from this data? What areas or action items received a high number of tally marks? What areas or action items received a low number of tally marks? Do you see any patterns? As you consider those questions, reflect on a plan of action that you might use to further support that child's development.

Table 5.4.2: Advantages and Disadvantages of Frequency Data

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Quick and easy to use, and no training is required 2. Can be personalized or designed to gather specific baseline data (play patterns, challenging behaviors, social situations, temperamental traits) 3. Provides immediate quantifiable data 4. Ideal for tracking behaviors over time and for noting an increase or decrease of incidents 5. Can be useful when planning behavior modification strategies 6. Data can be graphed or charted to find consistent patterns	1. Does not provide rich details or context like anecdotal notes or running records 2. There is no clear sequence of events regarding certain actions or behaviors 3. (Although the behavior is tracked, information about the antecedent and the consequence is missing) 4. Does not provide qualitative evidence 5. Results may be misleading

Frequency Count to Track Areas and Interests				
Child's Name:				
Observation Date:	INDOOR CYCLE		OUTDOOR CYCLE	
	Start Time:	End Time:	Start Time:	End Time:
Areas and Interests	Tally Marks	Total	Tally Marks	Total
Art				
Blocks / Legos				
Library / Reading				
Dramatic Play				
Math				
Writing / Journaling				
Science / Nature				
Sensory				
Quiet Corner				
Computer Lab				
Music / Movement				
Climbing Structure				
Bikes				
Organized Games				
Super-Hero Play				
Rough and Tumble				
Running / Chasing				

Frequency Count to Track Play Patterns and Social Interactions				
Observation Date:	INDOOR CYCLE		OUTDOOR CYCLE	
	Start Time:	End Time:	Start Time:	End Time:
Play Patterns and Social Interactions	Tally Marks	Total	Tally Marks	Total
Solitary Play: Plays alone – does not seek out peer social interactions				
Parallel Play: Plays next to someone, using similar materials but did not directly interact				
Associative Play: Shares materials and talks to others while engaged in an activity				
Cooperative Play: Plays with peers in an organized manner with rules, taking turns				
Peer Interactions: Plays with Boys				
Peer Interactions: Plays with Girls				
Interactions with Teacher: Talks to teacher / shares ideas / asks for help				
Bystander: Is yelled at, hit or involved in an altercation / incident				
Instigates / Initiates Disputes: Hits, takes toys, yells at peers, causes an altercation / incident				
Problem solves: Communicated and resolved disputes without teachers help				
Teacher Interactions: Teacher needed to help resolve peer disputes / altercations				

Frequency Count to Track Temperament and Behavior				
Observation Date	INDOOR CYCLE		OUTDOOR CYCLE	
	Start Time End Time		Start Time End Time	
Temperament Traits and Behavior	Tally Marks	Total	Tally Marks	Total
Appears Highly Active – Rarely sits still, moves around, fidgets A LOT, races through activities				
Appears Easily Distracted Changes activities before finishing task / looks around a lot				
Appears Focused Completes tasks before moving on to the next task / can tune others out				
Reacts Intensely Has high emotional energy when reacting to others – yells/cries				
Remains Calm Able to transitions and go with the flow/does not react to altercations				
Appears Sensitive Squirms when touched, holds ears, squints, doesn't seem to like to touch certain textures				
Appears Cautious Hesitates or needs time to warm up to people and activities before joining in				
Appears to be in a good mood Smiles/ laughs often, cooperates with others and seems pleasant				
Appears Moody Has difficulty making transitions, displays highs and lows, rarely smiles when interacting with others				

Checklists

Checklists are an efficient and practical way to collect information about a child's development. Checklists are based on "developmental norms" as determined by developmental theorists. With each age range, there are certain expectations and skills

that a child should be able to achieve. Checklists are designed to track a child's competencies in all the developmental domains including physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional. With a checklist, teachers can easily see what a child can do, as well as note what areas of development need further support. Teachers can create their own checklists based on certain skill sets, or they can download a formal developmental milestone checklist from a reputable source to look at a child's full range of development. Checklists can be used to track a large group of children or an individual child.

Collecting your data

Whether you design your own checklist or download one, use it regularly to collect data. The checklist can be utilized in two ways:

1. You can observe a child on a specific day while they are engaged in an activity (either child-directed or teacher-directed). As you observe, you will check off the skills or milestones that the child can do on that day, at that moment.
2. You can also review data from other observations (e.g. running records or anecdotal notes, work samples) that you collected, and ADD any other skills or milestones that were mastered during those previous observations.

*Note: It is vital that you note the dates that you observed the skills being mastered. A check mark alone will limit the reliability and validity

Organizing your data

Schedule a day and time to regularly review your observation data. Data collected from other observations (mastered milestones and developing skill sets) can be added to the checklist so you can clearly see a child's progress over time. You may use colored pens to track all the different dates that milestones were achieved. As you review the checklist, what can you interpret from this data? Does the child demonstrate strengths in any of the developmental domains or areas of learning? Which milestones and skills need further support? As you consider those questions, reflect on a plan of action that you might use to further support that child's development. How can you provide opportunities for the child to gain more practice? What adjustments need to be made to make the activity more challenging? What extensions can be added to continue the learning pattern? ^[24]

Table 5.4.3: Advantages and Disadvantages of Checklists

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Ideal for tracking a child's progress over time 2. Different observers (the teacher, assistant or a support team) can check off skills that they observe the child doing 3. Checklists can be created to measure specific areas of development, or a subset of developmental skills 4. Checklists can be used to observe a group of children or an individual child 5. Checklists are quick and easy to use, and no training is required 6. Checklists can be used in conjunction with other observations 7. Checklists highlight the developmental strengths a child has mastered, as well as those skills that need further support 8. Developmental Milestone Checklists are readily available online through various agencies (i.e. Center for Disease Control) 9. Data can help plan curriculum activities	1. Checklists do not provide rich details or context like anecdotal notes or running records 2. There is no clear sequence of events to regarding certain actions or behaviors 3. Checklists focus on developmental norms and typical development with no regard for environment, family influences, cultural influences and individual development 4. Teachers tend to focus on the skills and milestones that haven't been mastered, focusing on the deficits rather than highlighting the strengths. This can make the child and parents feel as if they have failed or add unnecessary stress 5. Checklists must be updated regularly using other observation methods

Checklist for Physical Milestone

Perceptual Movement

Skills	Can Do	Needs Further Support	Date and Evidence
Moves in a zig-zag pattern – able to change directions with ease			
Plays follow the leaders and mirrors others movements			
Moves body to music cues			
Speeds up and slows down while running or riding bike			

Gross Motor Movement

Skills	Can Do	Needs Further Support	Date and Evidence
Completes tasks on an obstacle course			
Changes directions and stops quickly while running			
Pumps legs on a swing			
Runs and uses arm and legs in opposition			
Climbs			
Walks up and down stairs with one foot on each stair step			
Hops on one foot			
Kicks balls			
Catches and throws (bean bags and balls)			
Pedals a 3-wheeled bike (tricycle)			
Bounces a ball several times			
Walks along a balance beam			
Jumps up and down, jumps forward using arms			

Fine Motor Movement

Skills	Can Do	Needs Further Support	Date and Evidence
Cuts with scissors			
Uses writing utensils (markers, crayons, pencils) to scribble			
Prints letters, numbers			
Uses stamps and stamp pad			
Strings beads			
Pours liquid into cup			
Manipulates, moves and picks up small objects			
Uses utensils to feed self			
Buttons and zips			
Peels a banana or orange			
Opens and closes a Ziploc baggie			
Scoops and pours materials (sand, dirt, rocks, beads)			

Anecdotal Records

An Anecdotal Record is “an informal observation method often used by teachers as an aid to understanding the child’s personality or behavior. It provides a running account of behavior that is either typical or unusual for the child” (Bentzen, 2009, p. 178). Anecdotal Records, also referred to as “anecdotal notes,” are direct observations of a child that offer a window of opportunity to see into a child’s actions, interactions and reactions to people and events. An Anecdotal Record is an excellent tool that provides teachers with a collection of narratives that can be used to showcase a child’s progress over time. As compared to a Running Record, Anecdotal Records provide brief notes that are focused on a specific event or activity.

Collecting Your Data

To gather effective observation evidence, you need to include the following components:

1. Accurate and specific details of the event (vivid descriptions exactly as you see and hear them happening - do not summarize, assume or make judgments)
2. The context, setting and situation that surrounds the event (the where, when, who, what, and how)
3. Objective facts about the child’s behavior and interactions (report actions and conversations)
4. Write records in the past tense

Here are some examples of observation evidence you might want to gather:

- Social interactions with peers
- Everyday routines, like mealtime and transition times
- How they utilize materials at the various centers (library, block, math, science, art, music)
- How they engage in teacher-directed activities (structured learning opportunities)
- How they engage in child-directed activities (open exploration opportunities)
- How they are inside and how they are outside

Organizing your Data

Once you have completed the Anecdotal Record you will take a moment to interpret the data. You will look for patterns and you will note whether the data reflects typical or unusual behavior for the child. To measure a child's developmental progress, you will look for their strengths (skills and milestones that have been mastered) and their needs (skills and milestones that the child needs further support with). The summary notes help you to clarify instructional recommendations (adjustments that you will make to the environment to accommodate the child's individual learning style). The notes you take can help you generate developmentally appropriate lesson plan activities and interactions. All Anecdotal Records need to be dated and stored safely in the child's portfolio or file folder.

Table 5.4.4: Advantages and Disadvantages of Anecdotal Record

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Provides vivid details about the who, what, when, where and how 2. Takes less time to write up an observation as compared to using Running Records 3. Evidence is documented as it occurs, in a sequence 4. Provides objective and descriptive evidence 5. Interpretation notes can be added afterwards 6. Evidence can be gathered formally (planned) or informally (spontaneously) 7. No special training is required 8. Provides qualitative data over time and is helpful in tracking changes in a child's development over time	1. Data can be tainted if it is not written in the moment 2. Focuses on one event, situation or behavior at a time and can miss or overlook important information 3. Does not provide quantitative data results 4. May not always report a child's typical pattern of development or behavior



Pin It! Writing an Anecdotal Note

Watch this video to learn [how to write an anecdotal note](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsxvbfLrLu4&t=92s) :

Watch this video to learn [how to use an anecdotal note](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAczTiO1rUg&t=3s) :

Anecdotal Note Template

*As you gather evidence, focus on 1 specific activity. Record what you see and hear. NO INTERPRETING!

Child (Children):

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Setting: Inside / Outside

Center or Exploration Area:

Activity:

Materials Used:

Open-Ended
Directed

Product

Teacher-Directed

Child-

What do you see and hear:

|



Figure 5.4.3: A Child's Masterpiece. [25]

Work Samples

Teachers have been collecting pieces of children's artwork and posting them on the classroom walls forever. Not only do the children enjoy seeing their work of art on display, parents appreciate seeing their child's work as well! To create an official work sample however takes more effort than hanging a picture on the wall. What exactly is a work sample? A work sample is a tangible piece of evidence that showcases a child's effort, progress and achievement. More specifically, not only does a work sample highlight the final product, it can highlight the process as well, by highlighting the child's problem-solving efforts, experimentation methods or collaboration skills. Work samples are authentic artifacts that provide information about the child's learning experience.

Collecting your data

Work samples can be gathered throughout the school year. Typically, you would collect a variety of samples that highlight the child's overall development in each of the developmental areas: Physical; Cognitive; Language; Social -Emotional. More specifically, you might include a child's drawing or painting, a writing sample from their journal, a cutting sample, or photographs of the child engaged in activities such as building a block tower or sandcastle or riding a bike.

Organizing your data

Whether you post a work sample on the classroom wall (using a documentation board) or you collect a sample for a child's portfolio, you must add documentation. Not only will documentation help families recognize the value of play, it reinforces the concept that every activity is an opportunity to learn. For accuracy, be sure to include the following information: Child's Name; Date; Setting; and an Anecdotal Note with a description about how and why the sample was collected. Work samples should be organized in a chronological manner to showcase progress over time. Be sure to store work samples in a safe place like a file-folder or portfolio, or electronically in a computer file.

Table 5.4.5: Advantages and Disadvantages of Work Samples

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Provides tangible/ visible evidence that teachers can use to track a child's learning, growth and development over time 2. Parents and children both enjoy seeing the work on display 3. Provides authentic documentation which is ideal for assessment 4. Teachers can use information to plan and adjust curriculum to help children achieve their learning goals 5. Families can see how children learn through play 6. Children can share their insights as to how they created the work sample and offer their perspectives as to what they were thinking (authentic evidence) 7. Children enjoy seeing their work on display and they can feel empowered when their work is valued	1. Can be time consuming adding anecdotal documentation and creating documentation boards 2. Requires ample storage space 3. Requires a financial investment in technology (camera, video or audio recorder) 4. Concerns over confidentiality and privacy when using photos, audio or videos

Work Sample Template

(insert a photo of the work sample)	
Child:	
Date:	Time:
Setting: Indoor or Outdoor	Center or Play Area:
Activity:	
What activity choices were available that day:	
Anecdotal Notes: (objective facts, vivid and descriptive details, concise observation information)	
Developmental Milestones that were supported:	
1. 2. 3.	
Quotes / Child's Perspective	

Learning Stories

In an article published in NAEYC's Teaching Young Children, Judy Pack shares her thoughts on Learning Stories, "I like to think of it as observing small moments that provide big opportunities." [26]

As compared to Running Records or Anecdotal Notes, a Learning Story is an observation method that is written in a narrative story format to highlight a child's learning. The Learning Story communicates more than facts about how a child approaches or accomplishes tasks, it spotlights key moments in a child's day and focuses on their strengths. When writing a Learning Story, a teacher not only writes down what she saw and heard, she can also write down what she thought about while she watched the child play. More than that, this method encourages the child and their families to be active participants in the reflective process. When the teacher shares the Learning Story with both the child and family members, they can add their comments, ask follow-up questions and make suggestions on how to move forward based on what was reported in the Learning Story. One unique aspect of Learning Stories is that when used regularly, they can help teachers connect to families and build strong, respectful relationships. [27]

Gathering your data

Whether you plan an observation, or you spontaneously watch a child as they play, and whether you observe during a teacher-directed activity or during a child-directed moment, you can gather some suitable evidence for your Learning Story. As you watch and listen to a child at play, you can take some pictures and jot down some objective and descriptive facts that you will use to write a story. As suggested by Park (2016), if you want to learn about a child's interests and capabilities, and how they process information; you will want to watch the following:

- Engagement: How long does the child stay focused and engaged in an activity?
- Intentionality: Does the child have a goal in mind or express a plan of action?
- Relationships: Does the child interact or connect with others?
- Learning disposition: Does the child have a particular approach to figuring things out or a preferred style of learning? [28]

Organizing your data

Whether you want to write a short paragraph or a full page, there are some key components that you must include in your Learning Story. We will refer to the EarlyWorks tool and the guidelines as recommended by Tom Drummond to write up your observation data. [29] Your Learning Story should include the following:

1. A Title – All good stories have a title that draws the reader in. Titles can act as a reminder of the content of the learning story, making it easy for educators to revisit at a later time.
2. Photos – Learning Stories should have at least one photo. Visual images evoke emotion and a connection to the story.
3. Narrative – This is where the storyteller (you) describes what is seen and heard. It is best to write in the first person, using "I...". The narrative is the body of the story and highlights authentic observation evidence (facts and vivid details).
4. What it means – This is where the storyteller (you) interprets the learning that took place. It is best to write in the second person, using "You...".
5. Opportunities and Possibilities – This is where you reflect on planning for the next step and building on what the child knows.
6. Family & Child's Voice – The child's family is encouraged to provide their understanding of the story. Families can create stories and provide valuable insight into the learning that happens at home. Children can also share their perspectives. [30]

*Note: A Learning Story Template is available

Table 5.4.6: Advantages and Disadvantages of Learning Stories

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. The child receives positive messages that their ideas and way of thinking are valued and they enjoy hearing stories about their successes 2. The teacher, child and family have an equal opportunity to reflect on the child's thinking and learning 3. The stories provide insight into the best way to plan for a more meaningful curriculum. 4. The stories capture moments in a child's daily life that can be used with other observation tools to create a comprehensive profile on a child 5. Provides authentic information about a child's strengths in a friendly and personal format 6. Informs families how children learn through play and how they are natural learners, eager investigators, and problem solvers. 7. Opens a door for respectful conversations with parents about school experiences	1. Can be time consuming 2. Can be difficult to remain objective 3. Focuses on one event, situation or behavior at a time and can miss or overlook important information 4. Does not provide quantitative data results 5. May not always report a child's typical pattern of development or behavior

Learning Story Template

Learning Story Title:
Child: Date: Time: Setting / Location:
Narrative: (I observed you today / I saw you / I heard you say / You played / You explored)
Reflection: (I wondered what you were thinking / I thought about...)
Major Milestones: (Here are some of the milestones you achieved today...)
Next Steps: (To extend your play and learning....)
Question to family:

Technology

Finding ways to utilize technology into regular routines can make collecting observation evidence much more efficient for busy teachers. Photographs, video, and audio recordings can authentically capture children's explorations, investigations, play and learning experiences in the actual moment. With this type of documentation, teachers can replay key moments in a child's day to

look for specific interactions, play patterns, developmental milestones, struggles and accomplishments. With this technique, teachers can also listen for language development by recording actual conversations that children are having with their peers. Teachers can also monitor how children problem solve and can tape special moments as well as capture every day moments. As with work samples, teachers can share their observation evidence with the children. Children are fascinated with seeing and hearing themselves. This type of documentation provides the most authentic evidence of all the observation methods.

Collecting your data

There are numerous ways to incorporate technology into your classroom. It is important to keep in mind that each early care and education program would have their own protocol, policies and procedures regarding the use of technology to document children's learning, growth and development, so be sure to verify what you can and cannot do. Here are a few suggestions that you may want to incorporate:

- Use a camera, laptop, tablet, or smartphone to record observations and take pictures
- Ask a child to dictate a story and you can type it up on a computer or use an audio recorder
- Scan or make copies of children's work, such as drawings or writing, to create a visual timeline that shows a child's skill development over time.
- Use email or a parent communication app to post work samples
- Use voice-to-text software to document important discussions. For example, children can explain how they created their piece of art.
- Take pictures of three-dimensional work. For example, woodworking projects, block towers, sandcastles, and culinary creations.
- Film dramatic plays and musical performances that the children produce.
- Use a video camera to document how children are progressing with their developmental milestones in each of the domains. For example, look at playful interactions to track social-emotional development; watch children on the playground to track physical development; observe how children tackle science or math activities to track cognitive development. ^[31]

Organizing your data

Observation data can be conveniently stored on a computer and each child can have their own digital portfolio or file folder. For every child, you would include photos of them at play, photos of their work samples, and any audio recordings or video clips that you may have collected (as suggested above). When using smartphones to take photos or videos, you can easily upload information to your computer or transfer information to other devices. Some teachers may want to use an app to formally organize observation evidence, and some schools may purchase a program that links families to daily observations. Some centers may even use an electronic assessment program (e.g. the Desired Results Developmental Program - DRDP) to track children's developmental progress and teachers would regularly upload observation evidence as part of the assessment process. Here are a few added suggestions on how you can organize and use stored electronic observation evidence:

- Photos can be scanned, printed and posted in the classroom
- A photo slideshow can be created for family nights or as a screen saver
- The children can watch a video montage of a themed project they completed
- Children can look at "old" photos to monitor their own developmental progress and can make comments regarding their work, their thought process and their developmental outcomes. ^[32]

Table 5.4.6: Advantages and Disadvantages of Technology

Advantages	Disadvantages
1. Provides tangible/ visible evidence that teachers can use to track a child's learning, growth and development over time 2. Parents and children both enjoy seeing the work on display 3. Captures authentic documentation which is ideal for assessment 4. Teachers can use information to plan and adjust curriculum to help children achieve their learning goals 5. Families can see how children learn through play 6. Children can share their insights as to how they created the work sample and offer their perspectives as to what they were thinking (authentic evidence) 7. Children enjoy seeing their work on display and they can feel empowered when their work is valued 9. With using multi -media, children can be observed in their natural settings	1. Can be time consuming adding anecdotal documentation and creating documentation boards 2. Requires ample storage space 3. Requires a financial investment in technology (camera, video or audio recorder) 4. Concerns over confidentiality and privacy when using photos, audio or videos

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5.5: Conclusion and References

An intentional teacher is a skilled and thoughtful observer. With each observation, whether a running record, anecdotal note, video recording, checklist, frequency counts, learning story or work sample, they are watching and listening, and considering what do I know about this child, and how can I best support this child? As teachers gather and organize their observation data, they begin to see each child for who they are as an individual, and as a member of the classroom community. With that information, intentional teachers can set realistic expectations of what children can do. Ideally, teachers will utilize the documented data to develop developmentally appropriate activities and to create an interesting and stimulating learning environment that is designed to promote play, socialization, growth and development. Now that you have been introduced to some of the tools and techniques that are used to gather information and document a child's development, in the next chapter, you will delve deeper to review the concepts of typical development and atypical development, and you will learn about some additional tools that can be used to track a child's development. ^[33]

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: How to Plan Effective and Meaningful Curriculum and Instruction

One of the highlights of being a preschool teacher was setting up my classroom environment at the beginning of each new school year. There was so much anticipation and excitement as I thoughtfully organized my classroom, stocked the learning centers with new materials, and planned curriculum activities. I especially enjoyed purchasing a new lesson plan book and writing activity plans each month. I gathered ideas from various teacher resource books that primarily focused on seasonal themes and kindergarten readiness skills—like language arts and math. As I carefully considered topics for each month, I planned for indoor and outdoor activities, music and movement activities, along with a variety of play opportunities. I thought about creative art projects and planned for engaging circle time discussions. I created quiet corners, learning centers, decorated the walls with store-bought posters, and strived to make the classroom environment safe and welcoming. Some twenty years later, as I write this text and reflect on my own experiences as a preschool teacher, a few questions come to mind:

- Who was I planning curriculum and instruction for—me, the children, their families, or my program director?
- How could I possibly have planned meaningful curriculum and instruction if I did not know the children who were being placed in my care?
- How could I have been intentional in my teaching practices if I did not know the children’s individual interests, abilities, and needs?

Above is from: Gina Peterson and Emily Elam (Original authors of the OER).

In this chapter, we will examine how observation and documentation are used to develop effective curriculum and instruction. We will explore what curriculum is, and we will discuss the benefits of planning developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction. Additionally, the teacher’s role will be examined. Lastly, we will discuss how to plan effective and meaningful curriculum and instruction using observation, documentation, interpretation, and reflection as best practices.

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Define *curriculum*, *content*, *pedagogy*, and *assessment* as they relate to early childhood education.
2. Use baseline data (observation and documentation) to develop curricular experiences and plans.
3. Identify and align developmentally appropriate learning standards with measurable learning objectives that include: learner, target behavior, timeline, criteria, and context.
4. Distinguish between formative and summative assessments and their roles in planning for curricular experiences.
5. Reflect on assessment outcomes to revise curricular experience plans and support ongoing learning throughout the school year.

[6.1: Early Childhood Curriculum and Pedagogy](#)

[6.2: Benefits of Implementing a Meaningful Curriculum](#)

[6.3: The Curriculum Planning Cycle at a Glance](#)

[6.4: A Closer Look at the Curriculum Planning Cycle](#)

[6.5: Critical Components of Play Center Plans, Small and Large Group Planning, and Assessment in Early Childhood Education](#)

[6.6: Summative Assessment—To What Extent Have Students Mastered the Standards?](#)

[6.7: Conclusion and References](#)

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Michelle Sands, Northern Illinois University

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6.1: Early Childhood Curriculum and Pedagogy

In early care and education, we value how children process information, we recognize how important their feelings are, and we place great significance on how children learn to socialize with others. As intentional teachers, our primary goal is to incorporate a curriculum that supports the “whole child” in all domains of development, including social, emotional, physical, and intellectual. The word *curriculum* can mean different things to different people. For some, the curriculum can provide the framework for learning. For others it can be a variety of planned activities, and for others a curriculum is a way to drive learning outcomes, goals, and objectives. The curriculum can be developed by teachers, or it can be purchased as part of a prefabricated program; it can be child-directed, and it can be teacher-directed.

According to a joint position paper by the National Association for the Education of Young Child (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Department of Education (NAECS- SDE), “Curriculum is an organized framework that delineates the content children are to learn, the processes through which children achieve identified curricular goals, what teachers do to help achieve these goals, and the context in which teaching and learning occur” (2009). In other words, the curriculum helps teachers organize the day-to-day activities, it outlines the learning goals and outcomes that teachers need to assess, and lastly, the curriculum provides teachers with the guidance and structure that they need to teach.

In early childhood education, content refers to the specific knowledge, concepts, and skills that educators aim to teach young children across developmental domains and subject areas. These content areas include foundational topics such as language and literacy, early math, science exploration, social studies, the arts, and social-emotional learning (Copple and Bredekamp 2009; NAEYC 2022). Content in early childhood is developmentally appropriate and delivered through play-based, hands-on, and inquiry-driven activities that align with how young children learn best—through active engagement, sensory experiences, and meaningful interactions with peers and adults (Epstein 2014; Bredekamp 2019).

Rather than being taught in isolated subjects, content is often integrated across daily routines, thematic units, and learning centers. For example, a lesson on plants may include content from science (plant life cycles), literacy (plant-related vocabulary and stories), math (counting seeds or measuring growth), and art (drawing or painting flowers) (NAEYC 2020). Effective content planning in early childhood ensures that experiences are both age-appropriate and culturally responsive, promoting children’s curiosity and foundational understanding in a holistic, interconnected way (Copple and Bredekamp 2009; Tomlinson 2014).

While curriculum and content describe “what” we teach young children, methods or pedagogy describe the “how,” or what methods and strategies we use to deliver the curriculum and content. Early childhood pedagogy refers to the art and science of teaching young children, encompassing the methods, strategies, and approaches educators use to support children’s learning and development during the early years (Copple and Bredekamp 2009). It involves creating learning environments that are developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and based on children’s interests and strengths (Bredekamp 2019). Effective pedagogy in early childhood emphasizes play-based, inquiry-driven experiences that promote holistic development—cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language skills—through intentional adult–child interactions (Epstein 2014; NAEYC 2022).

Moreover, early childhood pedagogy recognizes the importance of building strong relationships with children and families, incorporating their backgrounds and values into the learning process (Tomlinson 2014). It integrates ongoing observation and assessment to inform responsive teaching practices, ensuring that instruction meets each child’s unique needs and fosters a positive disposition toward learning (National Research Council 2008).

“The idea of mirrors and windows is useful for curriculum development. The curriculum should provide mirrors so that children see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in the learning environment, materials, and activities. The curriculum should also provide windows on the world so that children learn about peoples, places, arts, science, and so on that they would otherwise not encounter. In diverse and inclusive learning communities, one child’s mirrors are another child’s windows, making for wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning” (NAEYC 2020, p. 25).

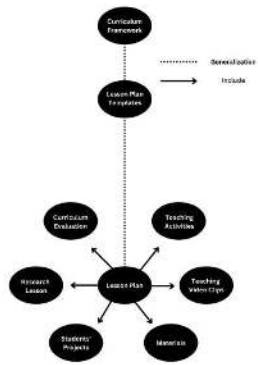


Figure 1. Lesson Plan Concept Mapping. Reproduced by Sands; Original by Peterson and Elam (2020).

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6.2: Benefits of Implementing a Meaningful Curriculum

From the moment a child is born, each interaction and experience affects their brain development and lays the foundation for future success. Research on brain development shows that early experiences are essential. It is suggested that if children are not interested in what they are learning, and if it is not meaningful or connected to their cultural practices, they will not create new neural pathways in which to store new knowledge. Subsequently, children will not retain information or learn as intended. As suggested in the California Early Learning Foundations, well well-planned curriculum provides opportunities for children to use, build, and master skills. With every engaging activity, children are encouraged to investigate key concepts in mathematics, science, and literacy, explore their creativity, establish relationships with peers, and develop self-efficacy skills.



Figure 2. Robust Curriculum

It is important to note that thoughtful curriculum planning does not impact children for that present moment alone. A high-quality program that incorporates meaningful curriculum can provide long-lasting benefits. As demonstrated with the Abecedarian Project, a vastly recognized longitudinal research study that followed a group of 111 children into adulthood (Campbell et al. 2012). The results of the study showed that not only did the children who received high-quality childcare outperform their peers in math and reading, but 30 years later the project participants continued to exhibit significant merits as compared to their counterparts in the control group. More specifically, children who participated in the Abecedarian Project were 4 times more likely to earn a college degree. Other significant benefits were realized; participants were more likely to have been consistently employed (75 percent had worked full time for at least 16 of the previous 24 months, compared to 53 percent of the control group), and they were less likely to have used public assistance. Project participants also appeared to have done better in relation to several other social and economic measures (including higher incomes), but those results were not statistically significant.

With curriculum being the cornerstone for children's learning, how can we be certain that children are receiving reputable curriculum that reflects their varying academic abilities, learning styles, personalities, interests, background knowledge, cultural experiences, and levels of motivation for learning? Teachers are the linchpin. As stated in the article "Observing, Planning, Guiding: How an Intentional Teacher Meets Standards through Play" by Patricia McDonald, "teachers are researchers, observing children to decide how to extend their learning both in the moment and by planning new play environments" (2018 p. 3). Teachers play a pivotal role in setting up the environment, providing the learning experiences, and guiding children so they can construct concepts, develop new skill sets, and discover who they are. Additionally, teachers are active participants in a child's development as they watch, listen, and think about what each child needs to thrive. As teachers monitor numerous situations throughout the day, they must consider when to step in and engage the children and when to step aside and allow students [to scaffold one another](#). At the center of it all, teachers who really know their children are better equipped to find the right balance of how to engage, motivate, and challenge learners. By observing and collecting information, teachers are engaging in the process of assessment, and these actions contribute to teachers' learning about the intricate details of what each child needs.

Let's take a closer look at how observation, documentation, interpretation, and reflection are used to support children's learning, growth, and development.

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6.3: The Curriculum Planning Cycle at a Glance

Observation: Looking and Listening

- May be spontaneous or planned
- Watch and listen to children while they explore, investigate, play, problem solve, interact and socialize
- Keep an open mind as you gather evidence and artifacts, and look for what children CAN DO
- Observe children during daily routines, transition times, mealtimes, and while inside and outside

Documentation: Recording and Collecting Objective Evidence

- Record what you see and hear, and include:
 - Date, time, and location
 - Child's first name
 - Who else is engaged in the activity
 - The purpose of the activity, highlighting what the child is supposed to do
- All recorded evidence should be concise, factual and have descriptive details
- Use a variety of observation and documentation methods and tools to collect evidence
- Record actual evidence as you see it (avoid summarizing or assuming)

Interpretation: Analyzing Data

- Ask questions:
 - What is this action telling me?
 - How did the child approach the activity and how long did the child stay engaged?
 - Is this behavior typical or unusual for the child?
 - Would this child benefit from peer scaffolding?
 - Does this child need more individualized support?
 - Does this child have more feisty, flexible, or fearful temperament traits?
 - How can I motivate this child?
 - Were there any new play patterns or social interactions?
 - Did the child master any new skills or milestones?
 - Are there any skills or milestones that need further support?
 - Were there any "red flags"?
- When analyzing behavior, consider the ABCs: the antecedent (what happened before), the behavior (as it happens) and the consequence (what happened after). Review previous observations to monitor progress over time.

Reflection: Planning for the Next Step

- Consider:
 - How can I set up the environment to incorporate the children's interests?
 - What resources and materials will I need?
 - What milestones, learning goals, and objectives can I further support with this activity?
 - How can I create a "good fit" for this child's temperament?
 - Did I acknowledge children when they met expectations, and did I provide genuine praise to reinforce positive behaviors?
 - Am I setting clear expectations?
 - Do I need to change the routines or schedule?
 - Have I incorporated all the developmental domains and considered the whole child?
 - Did I plan for individual activities, small group, and larger group opportunities?

Implementation: Applying Best Practices

- Create quiet and active spaces.
- Plan for indoor and outdoor learning experiences.

- Provide a variety of materials that will encourage open-ended play and exploration.
- Follow a consistent routine and schedule.
- Plan teacher-directed activities and create centers based on children's interests.
- Consider the project approach and allow concepts to develop over time rather than using "once and done" activities that limit children's opportunities to repeat and practice use of skills/demonstrate knowledge.
- Create a balance of play-based and skill-based learning opportunities.
- Plan to accommodate the diverse needs of each child.
- Create a respectful and caring classroom environment that is supportive and nurturing to all learners.

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6.4: A Closer Look at the Curriculum Planning Cycle

Children reveal who they are and how they think through their actions and behavior. How they play with others, how they use materials, and even the types of activities they choose to tell us a story. Each child has their own story to tell and it is up to us, as intentional teachers, to gather essential evidence and artifacts that can be used to inform our decisions on how to best support each child's learning, growth, and development. Curriculum should be thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, comprehensive, and likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children. To guide our decision making and to effectively implement meaningful curriculum, we must utilize the curriculum-planning process. Let's examine and discuss the four steps of the cycle.

Step 1: Observation—Looking and Listening

To develop effective curriculum, quality observations must be conducted. Whether spontaneous or planned, formal or informal, in-depth observations provide teachers with an advantage point. With each observation, teachers gain valuable insight that helps them gauge a child's zone of proximal development, and with that information, teachers can decide on how to best scaffold that child's learning. Likewise, teachers who conduct ongoing observations discover each child's baseline knowledge, and with that data, they can develop curriculum that supports children's play and learning in a developmentally appropriate manner. Furthermore, teachers who regularly observe can track children's interests which, in turn, helps them to select materials and resources that will fascinate, intrigue, challenge, and engage the children. Thus, when teachers take detailed notes and record objective facts, they recognize each child's individual pace, temperament, capabilities, interests, and needs. It is with this vital data that they can ultimately meet children where they are at developmentally and map out where they need to go by intentionally setting reasonable expectations and goals.

To truly discover a child's intent, teachers need to be fully attentive to what children are doing and saying while they are playing and interacting with others. To be fully attentive requires a particular state of mind. Rather than being actively engaged with children or guiding their behavior or directing their play, teachers need to find moments where they can focus on looking and listening. Teachers need to approach each observation with an open mind—free of bias and preconceived notions—to see what children are actually doing. Sometimes we can only look and listen for a moment; sometimes we can look and listen for a longer timeframe. Either way, we need to take in all that we are seeing and hearing so that we can discover a window into the child's thinking and find clues as to what they are capable of.

An observation is often prompted by a question. Here are a few questions that might guide your next observation:

- In what ways are the children using the new materials in the block area?
- Which children can cut a zig-zag line with scissors?
- Who will recognize their name tag that is posted on the outside table?
- Will Sofia play with a peer today or keep to herself?
- I wonder how Jackson will do at drop-off today?
- I'm curious to see how the children will react to painting with fall leaves and who will try?
- What activity area are the children using the most while outside?

As teachers observe to find answers to questions like those mentioned here, they will need to record what children are doing and saying. No matter which tool, technique, or method is used, teachers need to document what they are observing.

Step 2: Documentation—Recording Evidence and Gathering Artifacts

Documentation provides the vital evidence and visual artifacts that teachers need to accurately track each child's learning, growth, and development in order to plan developmentally appropriate curriculum. Documentation helps teachers hold into memory the significant moments of play, exploration, and learning. To gather data, teachers can opt to use several tools and techniques. Whether a teacher uses an anecdotal note, frequency count, or checklist to gather documentation, the goal is to have an extensive collection of factual evidence and work samples that highlight each child's actions and behaviors, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, social interaction, and intellectual abilities.

Let's take a moment to reiterate information that was discussed in a previous chapter about how to write effective evidence. First, all documentation needs to be factual. Teachers need to write down exactly what the children do and say. Second, it is suggested

that you record as many descriptive details as you can while remaining as objective as possible. Third, document the whole child's development. More specifically:

- (1) Look for what children “can do” and note the milestones that have been mastered.
- (2) Track language development by recording pertinent conversations.
- (3) Track play patterns to see who engages in cooperative play and who prefers to play alone.
- (4) Watch the interactions and social dynamics between peers.
- (5) To track a child's development over time, remember to include the following information: date, time, location and setting, activity, and note the children who are engaged in the activity.
- (6) To plan a meaningful curriculum, you will need to regularly review all the documentation you have collected so that you can ponder and interpret what was observed.

✓ Example

Pin It! Documentation Sample

Date: 2/10/25

Time: 9:30–9:45

Location and Setting: Inside during Active Investigation Time. The following centers were open: science—magnifying glass and leaves; art—painting with pom poms; blocks with transportation vehicles; computer station—Clifford the Big Red Dog.

Activity: Science Area

Children Present: Hannah and Zoey

Observations: Hannah and Zoey were in the science area. They scooted their chairs up to the counter where the class pet gecko was perched. “Hello, Gex. How are you today? What are you eating? Asked Hannah. I love Gexy Gex don’t you? Zoey asked Hannah. “Yeaah,” said Hannah. “I wish I had Gex,” said Zoey. “Me too!” Said Hannah. The 2 girls sat next to Gex the Gecko until it was clean up time (about 10 minutes). Hannah sat with her back to Zoey. Zoey played with Hannah’s hair (brushing it with her fingers maybe braiding it or putting it in a ponytail). They continued to chat back and forth to each other.

Step 3: Interpretation—Analyzing Observation Data

Before a teacher can reflect and plan developmentally appropriate curriculum, they must first interpret and analyze the documentation they have gathered. Ideally, as you observe and document, you are in the moment gathering snippets of detailed information and writing down objective facts. Once you have collected your data, only then will you begin to analyze “what does this all mean?” As you review your documentation, you begin to think about each child's individual actions, mannerisms, and behaviors, as well as ponder peer interactions and group dynamics.

Planning developmentally appropriate curriculum is somewhat like putting a puzzle together. As you wonder about the why, who, what, when, and how, you begin to put the pieces in place and generate potential curriculum ideas. First, you think about what the child can do on their own, and the milestones they have already mastered. Next, you think about if you are meeting each child where they are at developmentally. Then, you look for the areas of development that need further support. Lastly, you think about the zone of proximal development and how you might scaffold the children's learning so they can reach their potential learning goals. Ultimately, your interpretations will guide your planning efforts.

Let's review the table below, which illustrates the three zones of proximal development. This information was taken from "Three Learning Zones. The Integrated Nature of Learning" by the California Department of Education.

"The Can-Do Zone"	• Skills that children can do on their own • Milestones that children have mastered • Children can scaffold peers
"The Learning Zone"	• Opportunities for learning • Children engage in meaningful activities that are intentionally designed to support their development • Teachers may scaffold and prompt children as needed
"The Under-Construction Zone"	• Skills and milestones that need further support • Children may struggle or get frustrated if expectations are set too high or are beyond their grasp

As you analyze your documentation, you might find it helpful to reference developmental milestones guides, curriculum-based assessment tools, and state standards or guidelines, which can provide you with a better understanding of what specific outcomes or goals relate to children's developmental domains, or what the typical expectations are for children at a particular age. In Illinois, the [state's Early Learning and Development Standards \(2013\)](#) and [Early Learning Guidelines for Children Birth to Age 3](#) provide practitioners and educators with guidance pertaining to children's growth and development in the early years, including age-appropriate benchmarks.

Besides analyzing documentation on your own, you can share information with your co-teachers. With factual notes and work samples that document what a child does or says, teachers can collectively discuss what they think, and they can pose additional questions. For example, at some programs, one teacher works a morning shift and a co-teacher works in the afternoon. Although they each will have their own set of observations, having the opportunity to collaborate and share information about the children in their care will only enhance their effectiveness when planning the curriculum. Here are some possible questions they can ask each other:

- What growth do you see?
- Are the peer interactions the same in the afternoon as they are in the morning?
- What are your thoughts on this behavior?
- How did you handle this transition?

The high-quality practice of collaborating with co-teachers provides both professional and ethical support. When co-teachers are able to meet and discuss their observations, not only are they able to share their successes, they can also share their struggles. A co-teacher who is working alongside you will be familiar with the children and may have valuable insight that will help with your curriculum planning. They may be able to offer suggestions from a different perspective, as well as provide encouragement and empathy as needed. Another benefit of collaborating with a co-teacher is having the opportunity to share resources and materials with each other. Shared resources can extend curriculum possibilities.

Whether you analyze your data on your own or with a co-teacher, it is the careful interpretation of collected observations and documentation that generates ideas for the next steps in planning curriculum.

Step 4 Reflection: Planning for the Next Step

During the reflective process, interpreting the meaning of children's behaviors and interactions becomes important. These interpretations give us insight into each child's story. Each child's story informs our responsive practice. With this valuable insight, we can:

- adapt the environment
- modify the daily schedule and/or routines, and
- make decisions about how to guide the children's learning based on what the child knows and can do, as well as what the child is ready to try.

Planning curricular experiences requires a considerable amount of time. Teachers need time to observe and collect documentation, they need time to interpret their data, and they need time to reflect on how to use that data to plan effective strategies that will foster a child's learning. High-quality preschool programs that support intentional teaching allocate time in teachers' schedules for them to reflect and plan curricular experiences individually and collectively as a team (California Department of Education, 2010).

As we reflect, we must ask ourselves a wide range of questions. The answers to these questions lead to individualized care and learning. Let's look at a few questions you may ask yourself as you begin to plan developmentally appropriate curricular experiences:

- What skill or activity does the child appear to be working on?
- What learning strategies is the child using to play with different toys?
- Does the child engage with objects or people differently than a month ago? What has changed? What has not changed?
- Do my actions affect the outcomes of the child's experience? How so?
- How does this information relate to goals for the child? The family's goals? The school or program's continuous improvement goals?

Once we have reviewed all of our data, we can plan meaningful curricular experiences. The most effective curricular experiences will:

- Motivate children to explore their environment
- Inspire children to investigate various centers and activities
- Encourage children to create with new materials
- Allow children to engage in conversations and prompt them to ask questions
- Prompt children to interact with peers
- Permit children to problem solve
- Celebrate diversity and embrace uniqueness
- Accommodate each child's learning styles and individual needs

As teachers reflect on children's play, they discover possibilities for designing curricular experiences to sustain, extend, and help children's play to be more complex and, consequently, support the children's continual learning. Teachers review ideas for possible next steps in the curriculum. Possible steps might include adding materials to interest areas, books to read with large or small groups, activities to do in small groups, or a topic to investigate over time with the children. With clear ideas or objectives in mind, teachers plan curricular experiences that include strategies to enhance the learning of all children in a group and strategies to support the learning of individual children.



Figure 3. Reflection is the Center of Curriculum Planning

✓ Example

Pin It! Observation and Documentation

Date: 10/10/24

Time: 10:45–10:55 am

Location and Setting: Inside during open exploration the following centers were open: easel painting, blocks with fall materials, dramatic play with firefighter and homelife, math center with pumpkin cutouts for counting, library area.

Activity: Dramatic play area and library area

Children Present: Joey

- **Observation:** Joey played in the dramatic play area. He was dressed up in the firefighter outfit. He held the toilet paper roll in his left hand and pointed it towards a basket of stuffed animals. As he waved the toilet paper roll back and forth (side to side) he said “pssssshhhssshhh.” After a minute or so, Joey dropped the toilet paper roll and picked up a stuffed doggie from the basket. He took the stuffed animal to the table. As he petted the doggie, he said “You’re ok, you’re ok aren’t ya.” He then kissed the doggie on the nose, picked it up and carried it over to the library area where he sat down on the carpet square. He put the dog in his lap and started to look through a book.

Interpretation:

- With the recent fires, I wonder if Joey saw firefighters on the news or working in his neighborhood?
- I wonder if Joey has family members who are firefighters?
- I wonder what other community helpers would be interesting to explore?
- Joey has not been observed reading before. I’m curious to see what milestones he has mastered? Can he turn the pages? Can he recognize letters or words? Can he recall information?
- Joey played by himself. In previous observations he played with Martin. I wonder if he had a disagreement with Martin. I wonder if Joey needed time to himself. Maybe Martin wasn’t interested in playing firefighters.

Reflection:

- What materials can I add to the dramatic play area to extend Joey’s interest in pretending to be a firefighter?
- Are there storybooks about community helpers that highlight firefighters?

Once a plan has been formally written, teachers will implement it accordingly. While implementing the plan, teachers watch and listen to determine if the curricular experience was effective. They will watch how children respond to the activities, materials, and resources, and how they interact with peers and the environment, and how they process new information. In essence, teachers are looking for “the light bulb to go off.” It is during the implementation step that the curriculum planning cycle begins again.



Figure 4. Public domain; Nathan Lipscomb via [Image](#)

? Think About It...

Consider this case study:

For the past few weeks, children in Miss Emily’s class (ages 3–5 years) have been watching the crops in the field across from the preschool grow. During lunchtime, Miss Emily heard the children talking about what they had for lunch. Later in the day, the children watched the sprinklers water the grass and asked the teacher about how the water gets to the sprinklers. While playing outside at the sensory table, four children were fascinated with pouring and dumping water into pipes and seeing how far it could travel.

Observation: Lucas is somewhat cautious in joining others in play. He stands to the side and watches others as they play.

Interpretation: Lucas appears to want to join the play, but he may need just a little bit of support. I plan to watch for moments when he is on the sidelines of play, and find ways to invite him into the social play, and stay with him to support

him in his encounters with the other children.

Questions to Consider: What can you infer about the children's interests? What can you infer about their knowledge base?

It would be safe to say that these children understand that for plants to grow, you need to water them. It would also be safe to infer that the children are most likely interested in how water travels, as you observed their actions at the sensory table and their questions of where and how water reaches sprinkler systems. As an intentional teacher, with your observations, you would perhaps consider implementing your next unit on water systems where you can incorporate all developmental domains, based on the children's interests.

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6.5: Critical Components of Play Center Plans, Small and Large Group Planning, and Assessment in Early Childhood Education

In early childhood education, thoughtful planning and intentional assessment are essential for supporting young children's growth and learning. Teachers of young children must consider each child's developmental level, interests, and cultural background while aligning instruction to standards and goals.

Weekly Play Center Plans

During children's opportunities for free play, teachers can act with intention by selecting what goals or standards they would like to focus on in each play center and making choices as to what materials to add or change in that particular center. Play center plans can be used to guide teachers in classroom preparation, and they provide a focus as teachers support students during play (Gronlund 2013). However, it should not be used to limit children's autonomy in these centers. For example, if in the dramatic play center you have added some restaurant play materials (menus, wait staff notepads, etc.) but a child wants to take her babydoll for a walk in the stroller and not play restaurant, child-centered practice would include allowing the student to use the materials typically found in the center as they choose, as well as the new materials provided.

✓ Example - Play Center Plan Matrix

Dates: _____

Theme/Project: _____

Kitchen & Dramatic Play	Math & Manipulatives	Art & Creativity	Writing	Books & Literacy
Standard(s):	Standard(s):	Standard(s):	Standard(s):	Standard(s):
Materials:	Materials:	Materials:	Materials:	Materials:

Books	Science & Discovery	Sensory/Water	Music & Movement	Outdoors
Standard(s):	Standard(s):	Standard(s):	Standard(s):	Standard(s):
Materials:	Materials:	Materials:	Materials:	Materials:

Small/Large Group Plans

Documentation, or evidence of our intentional thinking during the planning of a specific curricular experience, is often referred to as a *lesson plan*. In early childhood education, meaningful and effective small/large group lesson plans include the thoughtful consideration of:

- measurable learning objective(s) aligned to state/program learning standards or outcomes
- use of baseline data to address student connections and relevance
- instructional strategies and differentiation (including materials and relevant vocabulary)
- procedures
- assessment and assessment differentiation, and
- home-school connections.

As a preservice teacher, lesson plans may be perceived as arduous as they are often typed or written out and can be quite lengthy. However, the purpose behind this part of preservice teacher training is to help teachers practice communicating their intentionality behind their decisions. This exercise is especially important in the field of early childhood education where there is a continued need to advance the profession and help others see us as the high-quality educators we are (Chong and Lu 2022).

Baseline Data—What Do We Already Know or Want to Know?

We have discussed how understanding what children already know is essential to designing effective instruction. Teachers gather their baseline data, or initial observations, checklists, child work samples, conversations, and family input pertaining to a particular skill or piece of knowledge, and they use this information to determine what and how to teach. Baseline data helps us to understand what is necessary to plan in terms of curricular experiences and to inform instruction (NAEYC 2022). Collecting and using baseline data is also a critical way that early childhood educators can support equity in the classroom, as these data help teachers recognize the diverse knowledge and experiences children bring. For example, a teacher might notice that some children can already identify letters in their names while others are still exploring print. The data helps the teacher group students flexibly and tailor activities to meet each child's diverse needs.

Learning Standards and Writing Measurable Learning Objectives

Aligning instruction to learning standards ensures coherence and developmental appropriateness. Early childhood educators often draw from multiple frameworks, including:

- **Developmental Progressions:** Understanding how skills typically develop over time supports realistic goal setting (Copple and Bredekamp 2009) or identifying reasonable expectations (Gronlund 2013). Developmental progressions are sometimes found in curriculum-based assessments (i.e., Teaching Strategies GOLD, AEPS-3). You can also use developmental milestones to better understand age-based expectations, including those found on the [CDC's website](#).
- **State Standards and Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework:** These standards provide age-appropriate benchmarks for cognitive, social-emotional, language, and physical development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2017). The [Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes \(CEELO\)](#) has a state-by-state map of information on each state's program standards for early childhood education. Illinois' standards for children from birth to five years old can be found on the [Illinois Early Learning Project website](#). The [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework \(ELOF\): Ages Birth to Five](#) is a guide to the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that Head Start programs use to guide their curricular choices.

Writing Measurable Objectives

Once a standard or reasonable expectation for students is determined, teachers can then create a measurable objective or goal for their curricular experience. Measurable objectives are critical for designing instruction and assessment as they provide a purpose or focus for the curricular experience, and they establish clear expectations for learning. A well-structured objective includes:

- **Learner:** Who will demonstrate the learning?
- **Target Behavior:** What will the learner do?
- **Timeline:** By when will the behavior be demonstrated?
- **Criteria:** How well must the learner perform?
- **Context:** Under what conditions will the behavior occur

✓ Example

*During small group time, children (**learner**) will sort objects by size into the three categories of small, medium, and large (**behavior**) with 80% accuracy (**criteria**) by the end of the week (**timeline**) independently using a set of mixed manipulatives (**context**).*

In some cases, there are multiple learning objectives that can be addressed during one curricular experience. However, teachers might consider how focusing on one or two objectives for the purposes of planning and assessment might be beneficial, especially if they are early in their career or experience.

Instructional Strategies and Differentiation

Instructional strategies refers to the methods and techniques teachers use to help children learn. These strategies include modeling, using visuals, hands-on activities, asking open-ended questions, small group instruction, storytelling, and play-based learning (Copple and Bredekamp 2009; Epstein 2014). Effective instructional strategies are intentional, developmentally appropriate, and aligned with learning goals (NAEYC 2020).

Instructional differentiation means adjusting teaching methods, materials, and learning experiences to meet the individual needs of each child (Tomlinson 2014). In early childhood education, it often involves modifying:

- content (what children are learning)
- process (how they learn it)
- product (how they show what they've learned), and
- environment (how the classroom is set up to support access and engagement; Tomlinson 2014; Gartrell 2020).

Differentiation recognizes that young children develop at different rates, come from diverse backgrounds, and have varied learning styles, interests, and abilities.

Procedures

Lesson plan procedures refer to the step-by-step, numerical sequence of instructional activities and interactions a teacher uses to deliver a lesson. These procedures outline how the lesson will unfold from start to finish, including the introduction or "hook" to engage students, direct instruction or modeling of new concepts, guided practice with support, independent practice for skill application, and a closing or reflection to reinforce learning (Hunter 1982; Tomlinson 2014). Effective procedures are clearly structured, developmentally appropriate, and designed to support the lesson objectives while actively involving students (Marzano 2007). They serve as a road map to ensure smooth transitions, efficient time management, and alignment with assessment and learning outcomes (Glickman et al. 2018).

Formative Assessment and Assessment Differentiation—To What Extent Did Students Achieve the Objectives?

Formative assessments are ongoing checks for understanding that occur during instruction. These checks include observational notes, anecdotal records, child drawings, and interactive games. In early childhood, formative assessment often looks like play, conversations, and interactions (Epstein 2014). Different than summative assessments, which evaluate learning at the end of a unit or program, formative assessments are embedded in daily interactions, activities, and routines (National Research Council 2008). The primary goal of formative assessment is to enhance teaching and learning by identifying what children know, what they are ready to learn next, and how best to support their progress (Shepard et al. 2018). In early childhood settings, where learning is holistic and developmental, formative assessment emphasizes responsiveness and relationship-building rather than standardized testing (NAEYC 2009).

Differentiation in assessment is especially critical for children with disabilities, dual language learners, and those from diverse socio-cultural contexts to ensure that a child's true skills and abilities are understood. Assessment differentiation in early childhood refers to the practice of tailoring assessment strategies to match the diverse needs, abilities, and cultural backgrounds of young learners. Because children develop at different rates and express their learning in varied ways, differentiated assessment ensures that educators capture a fuller picture of each child's strengths and challenges (Tomlinson and Moon 2013). This may involve using multiple assessment tools—such as visual documentation, verbal storytelling, or play-based tasks—aligned to each child's language, developmental level, and learning style (NAEYC 2009).

Home–School Connection

Teachers should incorporate home–school learning opportunities into their early childhood lesson plans because family engagement significantly enhances children's academic and social development. When families are involved in their child's learning, children show greater motivation, improved behavior, and stronger literacy and language skills (Henderson and Mapp 2002). Integrating home-based activities—such as take-home literacy bags, family interviews, or shared storytelling—creates continuity between the classroom and home, reinforcing learning in culturally relevant and personally meaningful ways (Epstein 2011). These strategies also empower families to become active participants in their child's education, fostering a partnership that supports the whole child (Weiss et al. 2006). In early childhood, where relationships and context are critical to development, home–school connections promote consistency, trust, and a shared investment in children's growth and success (NAEYC 2009).

✓ Example - Curricular Experience Plan

A Writing Activity for Three-Year-Old Preschoolers

Baseline Data:

In a classroom of 14 three-year-old children, over the past couple of weeks I observed my students as they engaged in a variety of play-based experiences—some teacher-directed and some child-directed. For example, in the art center we have had

watercolors available, along with paper on the easel, and in the writing center we have had notebooks, pencils, crayons, and markers, along with nameplates with each child's name and picture. The first week of school, we took turns working with children to have them draw straight lines and to trace their first name using their fingers and then a crayon on paper. The second week of school, we gave them the choice of tracing their name or drawing their name using crayons and paper.

In reviewing my anecdotal notes from the weeks prior, as well as student work samples, I recognized that three of my students were using a very light touch with crayons and scribble marks, nine of my students were able to make straight lines vertically and horizontally with minimal support, and three of my students were able to make at least one of the letters in their name. Because of this, I thought it would be a good idea to introduce a couple different child-directed activities into centers and to plan an adult-directed experience that would address the variety of skills of our students.

Illinois Early Learning and Development Standard 5.A—Demonstrate growing interest and abilities in writing.

Child-directed activities:

Play-Doh with tools and nameplates in art center to build fine-motor skills, tongs and large pom-poms sorting in math and manipulatives center.

Adult-directed activity:

Using crayons and name plates to write shapes and letter-like shapes during small group activity.

Learning objective:

By the end of the small group activity (timeline), children (learner) will be able to demonstrate drawing at least two letter-like shapes (horizontal line, vertical line, circle, x; target behavior) used to write the letters in their first name with verbal/visual cues from an adult (context) in 80 percent of opportunities (criteria).

Instructional strategies and differentiation:

Small-group instruction, modeling, and repetition; for three students who continue to use light touch with crayons and scribble marks—will give them broken pieces of crayon for ease of control and to decrease weight, may use hand-over-hand to support if needed. Slant boards will be available if needed. Students will each get to choose a crayon color, laminated name plate (first and last name), and construction paper. Vocabulary that we will use includes: up/down, left/right, straight, circle, x.

Procedures:

Introduction

- (1) Gather students and ask, "Who can tell me their name?"
- (2) Wait for students to raise their hands.
- (3) As each student says their name aloud, hand them their corresponding nameplate.
- (4) For students who do not raise their hand, hold up two nameplates, one with their name and one without. Ask, "Which of these is your name?" and provide the correct nameplate once identified.
- (5) Say to the students: "Today we are going to work toward writing the shapes we see in our name."
- (6) Explain that these shapes may be letters or parts of letters.
- (7) Let them know the plan: first, you'll trace your name, then you'll write it.

Instruction:

- (1) Tell students: "Before we start writing, we're going to trace our name using our pointer finger."
- (2) Ask: "Can you show me your pointer finger?"
- (3) If a student is unsure, encourage them to ask a peer or you for help identifying their pointer finger.
- (4) Say: "Now, I have a song I'm going to sing—you can sing with me if you'd like."
- (5) Model tracing your name on your nameplate with your pointer finger.

- (6) Sing: “Let’s Trace Our Name” to the tune of “The Wheels on the Bus” while tracing.
- (7) Encourage students to do the same with their nameplates.
- (8) After tracing, say: “Now that our fingers are warmed up, we’re going to try to write our name shapes.”
- (9) Place bowls of crayons on the table and invite each student to choose one crayon.
- (10) Hand out a piece of construction paper to each child.
- (11) Explain that students should try writing the first letter or shape in their name.
- (12) Ask students to point to the first letter on their nameplate.
- (13) Support students who need help by modeling with your own nameplate and providing prompts.
- (14) Model writing the first letter of your name on paper.
- (15) Prompt students to try doing the same.
- (16) Observe student attempts. If needed, modify the expectation to drawing a straight line or a circle.
- (17) If a student finishes quickly and independently, encourage them to continue writing the rest of their name.

Closing

- (1) Once students finish, instruct them to bring their paper and nameplate to you.
- (2) Ask each child: “What did you write?”
- (3) Allow each student to share before they go wash their hands for snack.

Formative Assessment and Assessment Differentiation:

During the lesson, the teacher will take notes using the matrix below to describe the child’s name writing. The information will note if the child was able to demonstrate the skill and if the teacher used prompts to help the child be successful.

Prompts = Ind (Independent), Mod (Additional Model), PP (Physical Prompt)

Child:	Can isolate pointer finger? (Y/N)	Horizontal Line? (Y/N)	Vertical Line? (Y/N)	Circle? (Y/N)	Letter(s) in First Name:					
James	Y	Ind.	Y	Ind.	Y	Ind.	Yes	Ind	J	J completed after providing model
Leticia	Y	Ind.	Y	Ind.	Y	Ind.	N	Not closed	L	With PP (hand-over-hand)

Home–School Connection:

Children will bring home a laminated name plate and activity sheet describing five ways to use the name plate at home and to build student’s interest and abilities in writing. Some ideas include:

- Have child trace the letters in their name using their pointer finger
- Together with child, create child’s name using Play-Doh with the nameplate as a guide
- Have child use dry erase marker to trace their name
- Have child use nameplate as a model when practicing writing their name
- Cover up letters in their child’s name and have child guess the letters that are covered

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6.6: Summative Assessment—To What Extent Have Students Mastered the Standards?

Summative assessments evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional period, a specific point in time, or the end of school year to determine what has been learned (National Research Council 2008). These assessments are typically used for reporting progress to families, informing transitions to new programs or grade levels, and meeting accountability requirements. Examples include developmental checklists, report cards, standardized assessments, or portfolios that showcase a child's work over time (Snow and Van Hemel 2008). While summative assessments can provide valuable insights, they must be developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and interpreted within the context of each child's experiences (NAEYC 2009). Summative assessments in early childhood should be used in combination with formative approaches to provide a more complete and accurate picture of development.

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6.7: Conclusion and References

Lesson planning and assessment are powerful tools in the hands of intentional early childhood educators. When grounded in child development and informed by frameworks such as those described by Ann Epstein (2014), planning and assessment become acts of care, advocacy, and equity. Through developmentally appropriate practice, including use of data-informed instruction and reflection, teachers create classrooms where every child is seen, supported, and celebrated in their learning journey.

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Additional Resources

- [Sample Small/Large Group Lesson Plan Template](#)
- [Introduction to Curriculum for Early Childhood Education](#) (Open Educational Resource; Paris, Beeve, and Springer)
- [Peer Scaffolding and How to Encourage It in Your Preschool Classroom](#)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: The Purpose, Process and Practice of Progress Monitoring, Screening and Evaluating for Determining Eligibility for Special Education Support and Services

It is essential that early childhood educators be able to recognize typical from atypical development. With typical development, there are certain behavioral expectations and developmental milestones that children should master within certain age ranges. Any behavior and development that falls outside of the standard norms would be considered atypical. As early care providers, how do we know whether a child's development is happening at a normal, excelled, or delayed pace? How can we be certain that we are providing an optimal learning space for each child? As intentional teachers, our goal is to accommodate all the varied skill levels and diverse needs of the children in our classrooms. Additionally, we must provide a safe, nurturing and culturally respectful environment that promotes inclusion so that all children can thrive. In this chapter we will examine the purpose, process and practice of monitoring, screening, and evaluating young children. If we are to effectively support the children and families in our care, we must be able to identify a child's capabilities and strengths early on, as well as recognize any developmental delays or developmental areas that may need additional support. Additionally, we must be aware of the resources and services that are available to support children and families.

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Describe how multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) can help ensure all children have access to the instruction and support necessary to make progress and be successful.
2. Describe the difference between universal and developmental screening tools and describe how they can be used with other data to identify students that may be potentially at risk of delays or disability.
3. Name at least two early childhood developmental screening tools.
4. Describe the legal requirements of an assessment conducted for the purposes of determining a child's eligibility for special education and support as described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

[7.1: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Progress Monitoring and Universal Screening](#)

[7.2: Child Find Procedures and Developmental Screening](#)

[7.3: Multidisciplinary Comprehensive Evaluation for Determining Eligibility for Special Education](#)

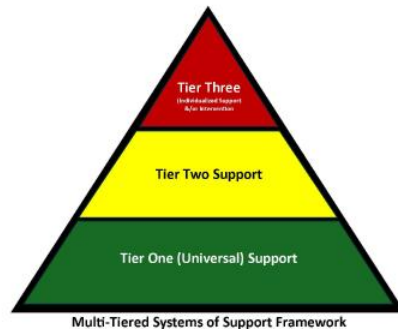
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7.1: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Progress Monitoring and Universal Screening



The [Division for Early Childhood \(DEC\) of the Council for Exceptional Children's 2021 position statement](#) defines a Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework for early childhood as an integrated, tiered approach to providing high-quality teaching and responsive caregiving for all young children. MTSS emphasizes differentiated supports based on data-driven decision-making to address developmental, academic, and social-emotional needs across diverse settings and populations (Division for Early Childhood 2021, 2–3).

Core principles of MTSS include:

1. all children can learn when provided with high-quality instruction;
2. universal access to the general curriculum;
3. focus on academic and developmental goals;
4. early identification of delays;
5. collaborative, evidence-based interventions; and
6. continuous progress monitoring (Carta and Young 2019, 3).

The MTSS framework promotes a whole-child approach, recognizing the interdependence of developmental domains and advocating for blended practices that integrate early intervention, early childhood education, and special education strategies (National Academies Press 2016; Grisham-Brown and Hemmeter 2017).

What does MTSS look like in practice?

High-quality use of a MTSS framework includes: (a) universal screening to identify children at risk before significant delays occur; (b) differentiated goals and outcomes based on data to match instruction to needs; (c) tiered instruction, ranging from universal supports (Tier 1) to targeted (Tier 2) and individualized interventions (Tier 3); and (d) progress monitoring to ensure responsiveness and adjust support intensity (Grisham-Brown and Pretti-Frontczak 2011; Buzhardt et al. 2012).

Tier One supports, or universal teaching and caregiving, is high-quality, responsive care to **all young children** regardless of their background or ability. These practices are designed to be developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate and serve as the foundation for more intensive supports.

Universal teaching strategies focus on the "whole child," addressing academic, behavioral, and developmental needs through daily interactions. Key strategies should include:

- **Balanced Schedules and Routines:** Providing a mix of child-led and teacher-led activities that minimize time spent in transitions.
- **Positive Behavior Supports:** Including clearly teaching expectations for every activity and reinforcing appropriate behaviors with behavior-specific praise.
- **Routine-Based Teaching:** Using daily routines, such as handwashing or zipping a jacket, as natural opportunities to teach relevant skills.
- **Focus on Social-Emotional Learning:** Utilizing real-life situations and peer conflicts to help children identify feelings and problem-solve.
- **Responsive Interaction:** Following the child's lead, imitating, and expanding on their communication to foster autonomy and engagement.
- **Critical Thinking Questions:** Challenging children with questions that range from simple recall to complex "how" and "why" inquiries.

Universal Screening Tools

In an early childhood MTSS framework, a critical distinction is made between **universal screening** and **developmental screening tools**:

Type of Screening Tool	Universal Screening	Developmental Screening
Core Question	"Is this child performing at benchmark levels ?"	"Is the child's development typical and is further testing warranted?"
Primary Purpose	To identify children at risk for academic or social-emotional needs who may benefit from additional instructional support before they fall behind.	To help identify children who may have a developmental delay or disability .
Goal	Prevention: Ameliorating learning difficulties early to potentially reduce the need for special education.	Child Find: Deciding if a child requires a comprehensive evaluation for special education services .
Tools	My IGDIs and PALS-PreK .	Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) and DIAL/Speed DIAL .

Universal screening tools must be quick, efficient, and inexpensive because they are administered to **all children**, often several times a year (e.g., quarterly). The results of these universal screenings should be then used in combination with teacher observations to determine if the child requires additional support in a specific area (i.e. literacy, math, and/or social-emotional learning). In section 7.2 we will discuss developmental screening tools that are utilized as part of Child Find procedures.

Tier Two support consists of **targeted teaching and caregiving strategies** designed for children whose development has stalled or who are struggling to master specific aspects of common goals, such as independence or consistency in specific content skills. These interventions are more focused and intentional than universal supports and can be implemented by providing increased dosage of instruction—like more frequent shared-book reading, variation of modality and presentation of content, or through accommodations such as adding specific attending cues to highlight relevant features during instruction. Examples of Tier 2 practices include small group instruction, packaged literacy interventions like *Story Friends*, or focused instruction or repetition of concepts in small groups. To ensure these targeted supports are effective, educators typically conduct systematic progress monitoring every 3-4 weeks.

Tier Three support and instruction involves **intensive, highly specialized practices** aimed at helping children achieve individualized outcomes. This tier is reserved for children who need systematic instruction on missing foundational skills or those who face significant barriers to learning. Tier 3 is characterized by the greatest level of individualization, intensity, and frequency; notably, these supports are provided in addition to Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction rather than as a replacement. Evidence-

based Tier 3 strategies can include chaining, naturalistic language instruction, and function-based behavior interventions. Because of the specialized nature of these needs, progress monitoring at this tier is the most frequent, often occurring on a daily or weekly basis._____

Additional information and guidance on multi-tiered systems of support specific to social emotional learning can be found on the [National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations](#) website.

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7.2: Child Find Procedures and Developmental Screening

Child Find is a legal requirement under IDEA that mandates states to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities who may be in need of special education services. In early childhood, this includes children aged birth through five. Child Find procedures often begin with public awareness campaigns, followed by referrals from parents, childcare providers, or pediatricians. Community screenings where members of a community can bring their young child to be screened using a developmental screening tool, are provided by local school districts or community agencies in collaboration with school district professionals.

Once a developmental screening is completed, the results are used by the multidisciplinary team (including the parents/caregivers of the child) to determine whether or not a comprehensive evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services and support is necessary. Timely implementation of Child Find ensures that children receive special education services and support at the earliest opportunity, reducing the potential for long-term educational challenges (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

According to DEC (2021), screening is closely linked to Child Find procedures. Universal screening helps determine if children are performing at benchmark levels, differing from developmental screening which determines if development is typical. Universal screening identifies children needing additional instruction before significant delays occur, while developmental screening serves as part of Child Find obligations and helps teams decide whether a child needs further evaluation for special education services.

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7.3: Multidisciplinary Comprehensive Evaluation for Determining Eligibility for Special Education

Children who may need more individualized support and/or might benefit from specialized services or individualized accommodations due to disability or developmental delay must qualify for special education services following a multidisciplinary comprehensive evaluation.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), "each public agency must conduct a full and individual initial evaluation . . . before the initial provision of special education and related services to a child with a disability. The initial evaluation - must be conducted within 60 days of receiving parental consent for the evaluation . . . must consist of procedures to determine if the child is a child with a disability under IDEA and to determine the educational needs of the child."

Before the Evaluation

Parents must sign consent for the evaluation prior to the start of any data collection. Before signing consent, parents should discuss and decide with the child's educational team (including teachers, related services providers, administrators, etc.) what developmental domains will be evaluated, how, and by whom. Additionally, parents should be provided with a copy of procedural safeguards related to special education. The date that the parent's consent is signed begins the 60-day timeline for comprehensive evaluation.

During the 60-Day Evaluation Period

A multidisciplinary comprehensive evaluation for eligibility determination should include a variety of assessment data that can include (but is not limited to): standardized assessment, authentic assessment, observation or anecdotal notes/records, environmental assessment, parent interviews/report, background, social and medical history, and vision/hearing screening and/or assessment. The parents should be active participants in their child's evaluation process.

Reporting the Results and Determining Eligibility for Special Education

IDEA requires that the child's educational team (including the parents) determine if the child is eligible for special education services under at least one of the 13 categories of disability described in the law (see below). Additionally, and importantly, the team must also determine that the child requires extra educational assistance or individualized educational programming. Meaning, not all children with a disability may qualify for special education *unless* the team determines that they require it.

If a child's educational team determines a child is eligible for special education, then together they create a child's Individual Education Program (IEP) based on the child's strengths and needs, which includes specific, measurable goals based on evaluation results, as well as accommodations, modifications, and supports necessary for the child to make progress toward those goals.

IDEA's Categories of Disability

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness
- Developmental delay
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment/deafness
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment, including blindness

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

To ensure that all children feel safe, secure, and nurtured, teachers must strive to create a climate of cooperation, mutual respect, and tolerance. To support healthy development, teachers must offer multiple opportunities for children to absorb learning experiences, as well as process information, at their own pace. While one child may be comfortable with simple verbal instructions to complete a particular task, another child may benefit from a more direct approach such as watching another child or adult complete the requested task first. Teachers who are devoted to observing their children are motivated to provide experiences that children will enjoy and be challenged by. The classroom is not a stagnant environment--it is ever-changing. In order to maintain a high-quality classroom setting, it is essential to utilize your daily observations of children and the environment to monitor the experiences and interactions to ensure there is a good fit.

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7.4: Conclusion and References

Monitoring, screening, and evaluating children is both necessary and takes time and practice. Rather than waiting until there is a major concern, intentional teachers should conduct observations on a regular basis to closely monitor each child's development. By watching children, we can find patterns. Once we understand the patterns, we can better understand why children do what they do, and ideally, we can create an inclusive learning environment that meets the needs of all our children. Understanding that over half of the children in your classroom may potentially have some special need, disability, delay, or impairment is crucial. It is essential to recognize that unless we observe regularly, we won't be able to refer families in a timely manner to get the support services and professional help that they need. Research tells us that children who receive early intervention are more likely to master age-appropriate developmental milestones, have increased academic readiness and are more apt to socialize with their peers. It is important to remember that everyone in the classroom, including teachers, assistants, and directors and supervisors, should be involved with monitoring a child's development.

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Using Standardized Assessment Tools – Characteristics, Methods and Techniques

While authentic assessment tools and methods are often considered to be the most developmentally appropriate, in some situations (including screening or comprehensive assessment for the purposes of determining eligibility for special education) some believe it may be helpful or necessary to combine the information gathered using authentic assessment methods with information collected using standardized assessment tools and methods.

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Discriminate between authentic and standardized assessment tools, as well as norm- referenced and criterion-based assessment tools.
2. Demonstrate familiarity with the names of a few screening and diagnostic assessment tools that are commonly used in early childhood programs.
3. Define and describe variables to consider when selecting an assessment, including sensitivity and specificity of screening tools, reliability and validity.
4. Demonstrate the ability to accurately calculate a child's chronological age, as well as basal and ceiling scores on common early childhood assessment tools and define what they are and how they are used.

[8.1: Defining Standardized Assessment Tools](#)

[8.2: Norm-Referenced and Criterion-Referenced Assessment Tools](#)

[8.3: Selecting a Standardized Assessment Tool](#)

[8.4: Using Standardized Assessment Tools](#)

[8.5: Conclusion and References](#)

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8.1: Defining Standardized Assessment Tools

Standardized (or sometimes called conventional) assessment tools and methods are those that provide a snapshot of a child's skills and knowledge on a particular day and specific context, typically using structured tasks and procedures that ensure reliability and validity in assessment outcomes (American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), 2014). It is because standardized assessments often mandate strict and “unnatural” procedures, that use of such tools with young children has significant limitations and they have received lower quality appraisals from professionals when compared to authentic assessment methods (Bagnato et al., 2014). Therefore, while standardized tests are widely used in various educational and clinical settings with older children and adults, their use in early childhood settings is typically limited to formal evaluation of development, diagnosis of disabilities, and to guide intervention strategies (McLoughlin et al., 2017). When used, standardized assessment should be combined with more authentic assessment methods.

Screening Assessment Tools

Early childhood screening tools are quick, broad measures designed to help identify children who may be at risk for academic delays, developmental delays or disabilities (Glascoe, 2013).

Universal screening tools are those used to help identify children who may be at risk for academic or social-emotional needs and are often used to identify students who may benefit from additional support or intervention. Some universal screening tools include, but are not limited to: Individual Growth and Development Indicators (My IGDIs; Hojnoski and Floyd 2012) and the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for Preschool (PALS-PreK; Invernizzi et al. 2004).

Developmental screening tools are those used to help identify children who may have a developmental delay or disability. Tools including, but not limited to, the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ; Squires et al. 2009), the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL)/Speed DIAL (Mardel-Czudnowski and Goldenberg 2011; Mardel and Goldenberg 2011) and others help identify if there is a need for further comprehensive evaluation but do not diagnose or identify need on their own (Bricker and Squires 2009).

Curriculum-Based Assessment Tools

Curriculum-based assessments (CBA) are tools that evaluate students' progress in relation to specific curricular standards rather than comparing them to a normative sample (Deno 1985). These assessments, such as the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System for Infants and Children (AEPS; Bricker et al. 2022) and Teaching Strategies GOLD (Heroman et al. 2010), provide information that can be used for assessment and instructional planning.

Diagnostic Assessment Tools

Diagnostic assessment tools are those that provide in-depth analysis of a child's strengths and needs, for the purposes of informing specific intervention strategies. Early childhood diagnostic assessment tools include, but are not limited to: the Developmental Assessment for Young Children (DAYC; Voress and Maddox 2012), the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI, Newborg 2020), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT; Dunn and Dunn 2007), the Peabody Developmental Motor Scales (PDMS; Folio and Fewell 2023), and the Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (Vineland, Sparrow et al. 2016). These and other diagnostic assessment tools are also used to aid in determining eligibility for special education or early intervention services.

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8.2: Norm-Referenced and Criterion-Referenced Assessment Tools

Standardized assessments are categorized as either *norm-referenced* or *criterion-referenced*, depending on their purpose and comparison methods.

Norm-referenced Assessments

Norm-referenced assessments compare a student's performance to that of a larger group, sometimes referred to as the "norming" or "norm" group. Their purpose is to identify a student's position relative to others, which can inform decisions about placements, selections, and identifying areas of need. Standardized tests like the SAT, ACT, and most IQ tests are norm-referenced, as they compare individual performance to a national sample of peers. Early childhood diagnostic assessment tools such as the Developmental Assessment of Young Children (DAYC) and the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI), as well as some screening tools including the Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL) are all examples of norm-referenced assessment tools.

Scores derived from norm-referenced assessment tools are typically reported as percentiles/percentile ranks, standard scores, or grade- or age-equivalent scores.

Common terms related to norm-referenced assessments, include:

- **Raw Score:** The basic number of correct answers before being converted into a comparative score based on the norm group.
- **Percentile Ranks:** Indicate the percentage of students in the norming group who scored below a particular score. For example, a student in the 85th percentile scored better than 85% of peers.
- **Standard Scores:** . Represent the age or grade level and month of the typical (median) score for students. For instance, a grade-equivalent score of 7.5 suggests the student's performance is comparable to the median performance of a seventh-grader in the fifth month of the school year.

Criterion-referenced Assessments

While norm-referenced assessment compare student's performance to other students, criterion-referenced assessments measure a student's performance against a fixed set of pre-determined criteria or learning standards. The purpose of criterion-referenced assessments is to determine whether each student has achieved specific skills or concepts. Criterion-referenced assessments are often used to identify mastery of content and inform instruction and the scores that result from such assessments are usually reported as percentages, proficiency levels, or pass/fail designations based on a cut score. State achievement tests that assess whether students have met grade-level standards, end-of-unit exams in classrooms, and driving tests are criterion-referenced, as they evaluate whether specific criteria have been met. Early childhood screening assessment tools such as the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ), are criterion-referenced, as is the early childhood education content test from Illinois Licensure Testing System (ILTS) that teacher candidates must pass to be eligible for teacher licensure.

Some common terms associated with criterion-referenced assessments include:

- **Raw Scores:** The number of questions answered correctly, often converted into a percentage.
- **Cut Score:** The specific score on a test that determines whether a person has passed or failed
- **Proficiency Levels:** Categories that describe a student's level of mastery, such as "basic," "proficient," or "advanced."

A brief video summary of the differences between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments can also be found [HERE](#).

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8.3: Selecting a Standardized Assessment Tool

Choosing the appropriate assessment tool (authentic or standardized) requires careful evaluation of its properties and purpose. Screening assessment tools are used for the purpose of either developmental or universal screening. When selecting assessment tools for use in early childhood education classrooms, it is essential to consider the *specificity* and *sensitivity* (often referred to as selectivity) of screening tools. Additionally, when selecting any assessment tool it is also important to consider its *reliability* and *validity* (National Research Council 2008).

Screening – Specificity and Selectivity

Screening tools in public health are used to quickly and systematically identify individuals who may be at risk for certain diseases, conditions, or developmental concerns, even before symptoms appear. These tools—such as questionnaires, physical measurements, laboratory tests, or brief developmental checklists—are typically administered to large populations by medical professionals to detect early warning signs and guide further evaluation or intervention. The primary goal is prevention: by identifying potential health issues early, public health professionals can connect individuals to timely diagnostic assessments, treatment, or support services, ultimately reducing the burden of disease, improving outcomes, and promoting community well-being. Screening tools are not diagnostic on their own but serve as a first step in a larger process of health monitoring and care coordination. For example, the Denver Developmental Screening Test – II (Frankenburg et al. 1992) is commonly used to assess developmental progress in young children, while the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 is often used to screen for depression (Kroenke et al. 2002).

All effective screening tools must balance *specificity* - the ability to correctly identify those without a condition - and *sensitivity* - the ability to correctly identify those with a condition (Squires and Bricker, 2009). A screening tool with a higher sensitivity minimizes false negatives, ensuring individuals needing intervention are identified, while a tool with a high specificity reduces false positives, avoiding unnecessary follow-ups (Glascoe 2013). The video “[Sensitivity and Specificity Simplified](#)” by Let’s Learn Public Health provides a thorough explanation of how these key measures are essential to consider when choosing a screening tool for public health purposes.

Similarly, in early childhood education, screening tools must balance specificity and sensitivity. For example, let’s say a program is planning to use a developmental screening tool to help identify children who may be at risk for developmental delays or disabilities. If the screening tool is too sensitive, it might flag many children as needing further evaluation—even if they are developing typically—leading to unnecessary worry for families and strain on early intervention resources. On the other hand, if the tool were too specific, it might miss children with subtle or emerging developmental issues, delaying access to needed support services. A well-balanced tool aims to detect true developmental concerns (high sensitivity) while minimizing the number of typically developing children incorrectly identified as at risk (high specificity), ensuring both efficient use of resources and timely support for children who need it.

Validity – Ensuring Accuracy

When choosing an assessment tool to better understand a child’s social-emotional skills, you can imagine how one might expect and want the assessment tool to include items related to identification of emotions, emotional regulation, social skills, etc. and not counting, alphabet recognition, or other non-related skills/knowledge. The term *validity* in assessment refers to the extent that an assessment measures what it is intended to measure. For example, if an assessment is designed to evaluate a preschooler’s early literacy skills, it should genuinely capture those specific abilities—such as letter recognition or phonological awareness—rather than unrelated skills like memory or fine motor coordination. Validity ensures that the conclusions drawn from the assessment results are appropriate and meaningful for the child’s development and educational planning. In early childhood settings, this includes considering cultural and linguistic relevance, developmental appropriateness, and the context in which the assessment is administered. Valid assessments help educators make informed decisions that support each child’s growth and learning.

There are multiple types of validity:

- *Content validity* ensures that the assessment covers the full range of developmental skills it is intended to measure. For example, a preschool readiness assessment should include items that assess a variety of skills, such as language, motor, social, and cognitive development, to provide a comprehensive overview.

- *Construct validity* is a type of validity that evaluates whether the assessment accurately measures the theoretical construct it is designed to assess. One example is an assessment designed to measure emotional regulation in young children should include items that assess behaviors related to managing emotions, such as self-soothing and frustration tolerance.
- *Criterion-related validity* measures how well the assessment correlates with real-world outcomes or existing validated measures, often described as *predictive validity* or *concurrent validity*. Predictive validity assesses how well the test predicts future performance - for instance, to what extent a kindergarten readiness assessment predicts later academic success in first grade. Concurrent validity compares the assessment with an established measure to see if they produce similar results. For example, a new literacy screening tool might be compared with an existing, validated literacy assessment.
- *Face validity* refers to whether the assessment appears to measure what it is supposed to measure based on its surface appearance. One way of determining an assessment's face validity is to identify if parents and teachers feel that an assessment of a child's social skills seems relevant and appropriate for evaluating peer interactions; if it does - it has high face validity.
- *Environmental validity* refers to how well the assessment reflects a child's performance in a natural or everyday setting. For example, instead of administering a standardized language test in a quiet, unfamiliar room, the teacher listens to the child as they interact with peers—asking questions, naming objects, and telling stories while pretending to cook in a play kitchen. This assessment method would have high ecological validity because it captures the child's natural language use in a familiar, meaningful context, reflecting how they actually communicate in daily life.

Reliability – Ensuring Consistency

Another important characteristic of an assessment is its reliability. *Reliability* in assessment refers to the consistency and stability of a tool in measuring a child's skills or development over time, across different observers, and in various settings. A reliable assessment produces similar results under consistent conditions—for example, if two teachers observe the same child using the same observation checklist, they should record similar outcomes (inter-rater reliability). Likewise, if the same child is assessed at two points close in time with no significant changes in development, the results should remain consistent (test-retest reliability). In early childhood education, high reliability is essential to ensure that assessment results are trustworthy and can be used to make informed decisions about instruction, intervention, and developmental support.

Types of reliability include:

- *Test-retest reliability* measures the stability of assessment results over time by administering the same assessment to the same group of children at two different points in time. One example of this would be that a developmental screening tool may be considered reliable if it was given to preschoolers in the fall and again in the spring and the scores were similar (and if the children's developmental progress is consistent).
- *Inter-rater reliability* assesses the consistency of scores given by different assessors evaluating the same child's performance or behavior. In this case, an assessment would be considered reliable if two teachers observing a child's play during a structured activity provided similar ratings of the child's social skills when using the same rubric.
- *Parallel-forms reliability* describes the consistency of results when two different but equivalent forms of a developmental assessment are administered. For example, an assessment might be considered reliable if a preschool-aged child was given a literacy assessment and another form of the same literacy assessment and they yielded similar results.
- *Internal consistency reliability* measures how well items within a single assessment measure the same developmental skill or domain. Therefore, an assessment of young children's fine-motor skills with high internal consistency would have a variety of items that consistently reflect aspects of fine motor development, such as grasping, manipulation, and coordination.

For a more concise summary of the differences between validity and reliability, watch [Professor Rachelle Tannenbaum's video](#).

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8.4: Using Standardized Assessment Tools

In addition to sensitivity vs. specificity, validity, and reliability, before administering a conventional assessment, teachers and professionals should also consider factors such as:

- **Cultural and linguistic diversity:** Teachers and educational professionals have a legal responsibility to ensure fair assessment practices are used across different populations (Hanson and Espinosa 2016; Banerjee and Guilbertson 2012; Santos de Barona and Barona 1991), which include methods that encourage and allow parent participation in the assessment process, and ensuring that children are assessed in their home language.
- **Testing environment:** Limited information is known regarding to what extent standardized assessments tools are being used and to what degree they are being used with fidelity. However, standardized assessments may not be the only source of information as it relates to assessment. Authentic assessment methods instead provide opportunities for individuals to learn about a child's skills and knowledge within a naturalistic, play-based setting and with individuals they are familiar with.
- **Ethical considerations:** Teachers and educational professionals have an ethical responsibility to adhere to professional guidelines and advocate for their use (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] 2024; 2003; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP] 2020).

Scoring Tips – Calculating Chronological Age

Chronological age is the exact age of an individual at the time of assessment. It is calculated by subtracting the birth date from the test date:

Chronological age (years/months/days) = test date - birth date

For example:

A child is tested on March 15, 2024, and their birth date is July 10, 2018:

- Year difference: $2024 - 2018 = 7$ years
- Month difference: March - July = -4 months (borrow from the year, making it 5 years, 8 months)
- Day difference: $15 - 10 = 5$ days

The child's chronological age is: 5 years, 8 months, 5 days.

Scoring Tips – Finding Basal and Ceiling Scores

Many standardized assessments use basal and ceiling scores to determine the range of administered test items.

- **Basal Score:** The point where a child answers a predetermined number of consecutive items correctly. Establishing the basal ensures that all previous items are considered correct.
- **Ceiling Score:** The point where a child answers a predetermined number of consecutive items incorrectly. This indicates the limit of the child's ability in the tested domain.

Here is one example of an assessment's completed score sheet:

Item # 1	
Item # 2	
Item # 3	Correct ✓
Item # 4	Correct ✓
Item # 5	Correct ✓
Item # 6	Correct ✓
Item # 7	Correct ✓
Item # 8	Incorrect ✗
Item # 9	Incorrect ✗
Item # 10	Correct ✓
Item # 11	Correct ✓
Item # 12	Correct ✓
Item # 13	Correct ✓
Item # 14	Correct ✓
Item # 15	Incorrect ✗
Item # 16	Incorrect ✗
Item # 17	Incorrect ✗
Item # 18	Incorrect ✗
Item # 19	Incorrect ✗
Item # 20	

Using the child's chronological age, you identify the starting point to be **Item #3**.

Basal Score
Assumes child can demonstrate all prior items correctly or age-appropriately.

Ceiling Score
Identifies that assessor should stop testing **HERE**

- If a basal rule states that a child must answer three consecutive items correctly to establish a starting point, and they do so at item #5, all previous items (#1–4) are considered correct.
- If a ceiling rule states that after five consecutive incorrect responses the test stops, and the child answers incorrectly from items #15–19, the ceiling is at item #19, meaning testing stops here.

In many standardized assessments, raw scores are tabulated by adding the number of items scored as correct after the basal score and up to the ceiling score (in the example this number is 7) to the basal score itself (in the example this number is 5). Using the example above, the raw score would be 12.

Understanding basal and ceiling rules ensures accurate test administration and interpretation (McLoughlin and Lewis 2017). Therefore, professionals must ensure they review and clearly understand the scoring procedures of any assessment tool they use.

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8.5: Conclusion and References

Standardized assessment tools can be helpful for screening, diagnosing, and monitoring developmental progress. However, professionals must be mindful of their limitations and ensure they are used appropriately and are best used in combination with authentic assessment tools. Understanding specificity, sensitivity, validity, and reliability as test selection criteria enhances their effectiveness in educational and clinical settings.

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Additional Resources

[Washington State - A Guide to Assessment in Early Childhood: Infancy to Age Eight](#)

[Criterion vs Norm Referenced Assessment: Examples & Evaluation – Teachings in Education](#)

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

9: Collaborating and Partnering with Families for Purposes of Assessment

From the moment a child walks into their classroom, they are learning. They are learning from their peers, their teachers, their families, and through their own trials, errors and explorations. How can we best communicate what children are learning to their families in a respectful and reassuring manner? How can we convey that a child's academic progress is just one aspect as we strive to develop the whole child? In this chapter, we will discuss how intentional teachers use documentation and assessment to effectively communicate with families.

The goal of this final chapter is to demonstrate how we connect observation, documentation, and assessment all together to provide quality learning experiences for the children and families that we serve, and that there is value in everything we do as intentional teachers.

By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Identify at least three essential elements (e.g., photos, captions, developmental milestones) included in an effective documentation board and describe how these elements communicate learning to families.
2. Create a mock family conference plan that includes at least five best practices (e.g., flexible scheduling, sharing portfolios, using plain language) to foster positive school–family partnerships.
3. Review a case scenario and outline at least two curriculum adjustments based on documented observations and assessment data to support individual child development.

[9.1: Introduction](#)

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

[9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress](#)

[9.4: Family Conferences](#)

[9.5: Conclusion and References](#)

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Michelle Sands, Northern Illinois University

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9.1: Introduction

From the moment a child walks into their classroom, they are learning . They are learning from their peers, their teachers, their families and through their own trials, errors and explorations. How can we best communicate what children are learning to their families in a respectful and reassuring manner? How can we convey that a child's academic progress is just one aspect, as we strive to develop the whole child? In this chapter, we will discuss how intentional teachers use documentation and assessment to effectively communicate with families. The goal of this final chapter is to demonstrate how we connect observation, documentation and assessment all together to provide quality learning experiences for the children and families that we serve, and that there is value in everything we do as intentional teachers.

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9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

When you walk into a classroom what do you typically see on the walls? Quite possibly you will see colorful posters, charts, family photos, and lots and lots of artwork. Have you ever wondered why we post things on our walls? Is it to make our classrooms more aesthetically pleasing? More colorful and eye-appealing? Do we want to motivate our children to do their best work because it will be posted for all to see? Are we trying to create a cozy space where our children can feel comfortable and feel like they belong? Are we hoping our parents see all the great work that we are doing? Everything that is posted on your classroom walls should communicate a message. Documentation Boards help us to convey important messages. A central message that I believe to be most important is that “Children Learn Through Play!”

When parents drop off and pick up their child, they may see their child playing with blocks, puzzles, playdough, or in the dramatic play area with their peers. To some, this type of open exploration or child-directed play (sometimes called free play) may look frivolous, inconsequential or perhaps trivial because it lacks formal instruction. The idea that learning can be playful, and fun may be difficult for some parents to understand. Many parents like to see some type of tangible evidence – for example, a finished worksheet or completed art project, to “know” that teaching and learning are happening. Thus, it is necessary for us as intentional teachers to convey the importance of play through formal documentation. We must provide parents with information that explains not only the end result,(or product) but the process of how curriculum activities are specifically designed to help children master milestones in all the developmental domains. More importantly, we must showcase that learning is a direct product of play.



Figure 6.1 Documentation Board . [68]

What are Documentation Boards

Documentation boards use observations and assessments to illustrate a child’s process of learning. When used effectively, documentation boards highlight the purpose of an activity and record the milestones that have been mastered (NAEYC , 2008). In order for parents to truly understand that children learn through play, documentation boards should include work samples or photos that highlight what the child did during the activity, along with several quotes to highlight the child’s thought process. When done correctly, teachers and families should be able to follow a child’s progress over time. Documentation Boards help teachers and families understand, without explanation, the child’s abilities and Interests. Documentation Boards provide clear evidence as to what children are learning throughout the school year in each of the developmental domains: Physical, Cognitive, Social, Emotional and Language.

What to Document

When I was a “young” teacher, I often felt obligated to post one piece of artwork for each child in the classroom so as to be “fair” that each child was represented. On my classroom walls, I mostly posted artwork and I didn’t provide any caption or describe the purpose of the activity. Not only did that take a lot of time, but it also took up a lot of wall space. As I became more intentional (and a more “seasoned” teacher, I learned that there was a more efficient way to showcase children’s learning. I began to use documentation boards to make learning more visible. Since learning is happening all day - every day in the classroom, there are a

variety of topics that can be presented. Documentation boards can illustrate something as simple as a child playing with sand and water for an hour, or something complex like a child learning how to tie their shoes over a long period of time. These boards can feature one child, a group of children, or the whole class. Here are some suggested topics to consider when creating a formal Documentation Board: daily routines, project-based activities, child-directed play and exploration, outdoor play experiences, circle-time conversations, developmental milestones, social relationships, and teacher-directed lesson plan activities. The topics are endless.

How to Make a Documentation Board

Posters, bulletin boards, and slide shows are all commonly used to create documentation boards. The format chosen to use for the documentation board should be reflective of the purpose, the audience, and the activity being presented. These boards can be simple, artistic, or even three dimensional. Before creating the board, consider the collaboration of additional teachers, children, and families. Having a team create the board adds a new level of depth, with various ideas and opinions. The first step is creating a title that invites families to approach the board. Next, mention the developmental milestones and goals for the activity (what the children are learning). Add photos and children's quotes (both parents and children enjoy this), Include the steps that were taken or the process, and work samples as the final product. An extra step would be to add a recipe card or take-home handout so parents can replicate the activity at home. While constructing the board ask yourself, is this showing the child's thought process, developmental growth, and both the child's and teacher's reflection. When creating your documentation boards remember that these boards respect all children's work. The board needs to value efficiency over cuteness, and engagement over entertainment. (The Compass School, 2018). Lastly, the Documentation Board replaces the concept there needs to be one piece of artwork for each child in the class. When you post several documentation boards, all with different themes and purposes, you will no doubt capture all of the children in your care.

Purpose	Title Name / Teacher		Data & Results
Question	Diagrams and Photos	Diagrams and Photos	Conclusion
Hypothesis	Diagrams and Photos	Diagrams and Photos	Discussion
Variables	Materials	Procedure	Bibliography

Figure 6.2 Documentation Board Template

Make a decision on what you want to communicate on the documentation board:

- Projects or themes
- Special events
- Specific curriculum areas
- Learning environments
- Skill acquisition
- Child development

Collect materials for the panel:

- Children's actual work or photocopies
- Observation notes / anecdotal records
- Information and quotes from books and journals
- Curriculum webs
- Quotes and dictation from children and teachers
- Photographs – various sizes (enlarge or shrink on a photocopier) – color, or black and white.

Select the best items that represent the idea or theme of your panel:

- Write an educational Caption for each piece
- Use a type size large enough to be read from a distance

Layout of panel:

- Determine where the panel will be displayed (on a table or wall?)
- Select a type of panel: poster board (best for wall) or three side3d board
- Title the panel
- Select a strong image as the focal point on the panel
- Aesthetics are important
- Matte work and photographs
- Use colored paper to support, not detract from, the images

The Perks of Using Portfolios

Another popular form of documentation is portfolios. Many programs use a portfolio system to record and store information about each child's learning, growth and development. Using both formal and informal observations, teachers begin collecting "evidence" within the first month of a child starting school. Throughout the school year, intentional teachers collect numerous work samples, anecdotal notes, learning stories, checklists, and frequency counts, and it is necessary to safely store everything in an organized manner. A portfolio is the most optimal way to do that. A portfolio helps teachers store observation notes, pieces of art, and photos that are needed to capture and highlight a child's individual strengths, interests and abilities. Portfolios can also store information about a child's thought process, behavior, social interactions, and needs. With all the stored documentation, teachers can assess a child's development.

Portfolios, like documentation boards, record and track a child's development. More specifically, a p ortfolio tells the unique story of each child's individual progress over time. Although portfolios are not designed to be an assessment tool, portfolios can be shared with families during a conference to showcase evidence of a child's learning throughout the school year. P ortfolios hold authentic samples and highlight a child's capabilities, achievements, and progress. During a conference, rather than receiving a handout with checked boxes that rate a child's level of learning, parents and family members will enjoy seeing first-hand what their child "can do." Having both a formal assessment and authentic work samples provides teachers and families a clear picture of the whole child's development.

Since learning and development are ongoing, portfolios have to be easy to use and accessible. Teachers will have to find a rhythm and medium that works best for their teaching style. Here are just a few examples of some portfolios:

- Electronic or e-portfolios stored on computers;
- Accordion files

- File folders,
- Three-ring binders,
- Creative memory photo albums

No matter which style of portfolio a teacher uses, it is important to label and date all pieces of evidence that you put into your portfolio.

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9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

Assessment is “a systematic process which allows for understanding a child’s competencies” ^[69] Every child in your class needs to be assessed. To properly assess children, we use observations and documentation to determine a child’s abilities, interests, strengths, and areas of development that may need additional support. The information gathered during observations guides the classroom routines, curriculum planning, and implementation to ensure quality care. Over time, assessments record a child’s learning, growth, development, and social behavior. Assessments also provide an opportunity to share information with families that will build a bridge from school to home.

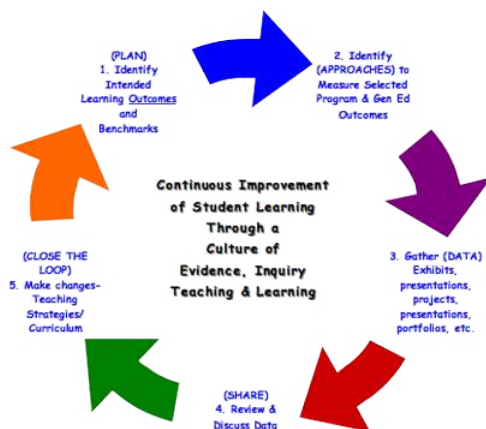


Figure 6.4 Assessment Cycle . ^[70]

Let’s take a closer look at how we might use assessments in early childhood education. First, assessment is used to inform instruction and to guide teachers as they plan curriculum. With each observation a teacher can assess children’s strengths and capabilities to determine an individualized plan of action with just the “right” balance of independent and group activities across all areas of development (e.g. social, emotional, creative, cognitive, language and physical). When teachers create meaningful curriculum based on the children’s interest and abilities, research indicates that children will take greater strides in academic learning and are more likely to be successful throughout life.

For example, a teacher may notice that one of her students has difficulty joining in and socializing with classmates during group activities. A teacher will then consider activities that would encourage peer interactions while also considering opportunities to support their independence.

Second, assessment is designed for accountability and program evaluation. Assessments provide information that is needed to evaluate program practices and to inform program policies. One of the hallmark traits of a high-quality early childhood program is the practice of continuously monitoring children’s development and responding to their learning needs. When administrators, teachers, and families reflect on program goals and outcomes they can determine specific areas that need improvement. Once areas are identified, they can focus on implementing professional development workshops and training in order to improve their ability in meeting the needs of children and families. For example, upon reviewing the math indicators for all of the kindergarten students in a school, the principal realizes that additional teacher training on math-related materials is needed to support math instruction and student learning across all of the kindergarten classrooms in the school.

Third, assessments are used to support school and family partnerships. Assessment helps teachers communicate important milestones in a child’s development to families. More importantly, when teachers share their assessments with families, there is an opportunity for teachers and parents to work together to support children as they grow. Intentional teachers respect that parents are teachers on the “home front.”

Additionally, families have valuable insight that they can contribute when assessing a child’s needs. For example, a teacher may not observe a child’s ability to identify colors but through a discussion with the parents, the teacher learns that the child identifies colors of fruit at the grocery store. In this way, parents and teachers collaborate to better understand what needs to happen in the curriculum or at home to support the child’s learning and growth. ^[71]



Figure 6.5 Children learn by interacting with their environment . [72]

Let's take a look at 4 Types of Assessments:

1. Screening tools
2. Diagnostic assessments
3. Formative assessments
4. Summative assessments



Figure 6.6 Workbooks assessment . [73]

Screening Tools

According to developmental theories, children may not reach developmental milestones at the same time. In early care and education, we recognize that there is an “acceptable range” for children to reach developmental milestones. That being said, we also recognize that when development does not happen within an expected time frame “red flags” can be raised and teachers may have concerns about developmental disorders, health conditions, or other factors that may negatively impact the child's development. A developmental screening is the early identification of children at risk for cognitive, motor, communication, or social-emotional delays that may interfere with expected growth, learning, and development, and may warrant further diagnosis, assessment, and evaluation. Programs may conduct the following screenings:

1. Developmental screening tools include the domains of cognition, fine and gross motor skills, speech and language, and social-emotional development.
2. Social-emotional screening is a component of developmental screening of young children that focuses on the early identification of possible delays in the expected development of a child's ability to express and regulate emotions, form close and secure relationships, and explore his/her environment and learn.

3. Mental health screening is the early identification of children at risk for possible mental health disorders that may interfere with expected growth, learning, or development that warrant further diagnosis, assessment, or evaluation.

It is recommended that young children receive screenings to help identify potential problems or areas needing further evaluation. By recognizing developmental issues early, children can be provided with treatment or intervention more effectively, and additional developmental delays may be prevented. Developmental screenings should begin early in a child's life and should be conducted through third grade. Practitioners should use reliable and valid screening tools that are age-appropriate, culturally inclusive and in the home child's language.

Developmental screenings are often universally performed on large groups of children. The results generated from this type of procedure most commonly are used by programs to identify those few children who may need to receive a more extensive or "diagnostic" assessment for determining developmental delays or special needs. Screenings are brief, and usually effective in catching the most severe cases of children who would need a follow-up evaluation. Screening tools can also be used to assess whether a child is developmentally ready to graduate or move into the next educational level, in other words - a child's school readiness. There is controversy around whether school districts should be permitted to use readiness tests since school districts are not permitted to deny children entry to kindergarten based on the results of a readiness test. One on side there are those that believe many children are often mislabeled. Because young children can demonstrate a wide range of results based on how comfortable they are at the time of the screening, screening results can be inaccurate and children, especially dual language learners, may be placed into remedial classes or special education programs. On the other hand, some proclaim that the screening process at this point will provide young children and their families with access to a wide variety of services early on.

Diagnostic Assessments

Diagnostic assessment tools are typically standardized for a large number of children. A score is given that reflects a child's performance related to other children of the same age (and less common gender and ethnic origin). A diagnostic assessment typically results in a diagnosis for a child. Some common diagnoses are related to intelligence, intellectual disability, autism, learning disabilities, sensory impairment (deaf, blind), or neurologic disorders. Persons administering diagnostic assessment tools must meet state and national standards, certification, or licensing requirements. Some diagnostic assessment tools used for determining or identifying developmental issues are The Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI), the Bayley Scales of Infant Development (BSID), electroencephalogram (EEG), Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (K-ABC), the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI), and the Pre-Language Assessment Survey (PreLAS). Many other diagnostic assessment tools are available for early childhood. The Buros Institute of Mental Measurements at the University of Nebraska publishes the Buros Mental Maturity Yearbook which helps educators and other childcare professionals choose a tool that is reliable and highly regarded in the diagnostic assessment community.

Formative Assessments

The primary purpose of the formative assessment is to gather evidence that teachers can use to inform instruction, implement learning opportunities and measure a child's learning. As stated in previous chapters, through ongoing observations, evidence is collected and then used to measure the child's learning. To gather an accurate account of what children are learning and how they are learning, observations should occur during daily activities and routines, and should be conducted indoor as well as outdoor. With this information, teachers make instructional adjustments to close the gap between a child's current understanding and what the desired goals are for the child as recommended by formal assessment tools like the Desired Result Developmental Profile (DRDP).

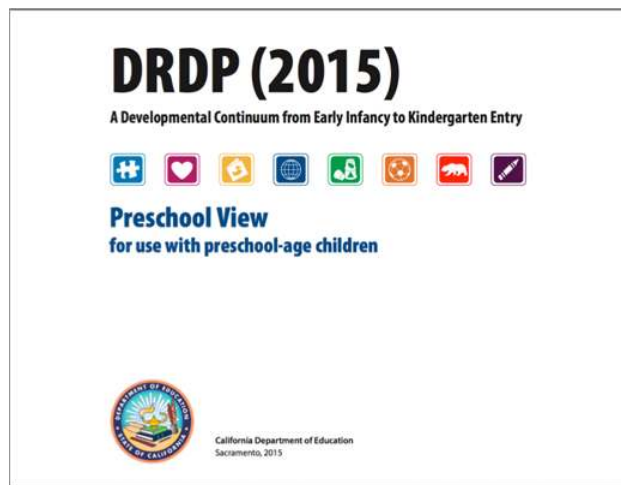


Figure 6.7 DRDP . [74]

Formative assessment can consist of formal assessments or informal assessments . Formal assessments are defined as highly valid and reliable and standardized tools that are administered in a similar manner each time for every child. These tools have standards of comparison (norm-referenced, standards-referenced, and criterion-referenced) to ensure equitable and consistent results. Such tools usually emerge from research studies published by a national company (e.g. Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) or Rating Scales that are based on the acquisition of age-appropriate developmental milestones). Informal assessments, on the other hand, usually may be published, but can also be developed by a teacher or program (i.e. a classroom checklist or frequency count chart). Informal assessments often utilize observable techniques such as anecdotal notes, work samples, and video recordings. Whether formal or informal tools and techniques are used, it is important to note that assessment is not a one-time event since it is difficult to gather valid and reliable information from just one observation technique or from one tool. Formative assessments are on-going.

For best results, intentional teachers are encouraged to assess children through authentic, naturalistic observations. Such observation should be collected throughout the school year, and not just when preparing for family conferences. Another best practice, early care educators are encouraged to actively involve young children with the assessment process. Informal observations and conversations are needed to purposefully plan intentional and individualized activities. Lastly, teachers are encouraged to share learning goals with both children and parents, as well as provide opportunities for children to monitor their ongoing progress. Learning Stories are a great technique to encourage joint collaboration between teachers, families, and children.

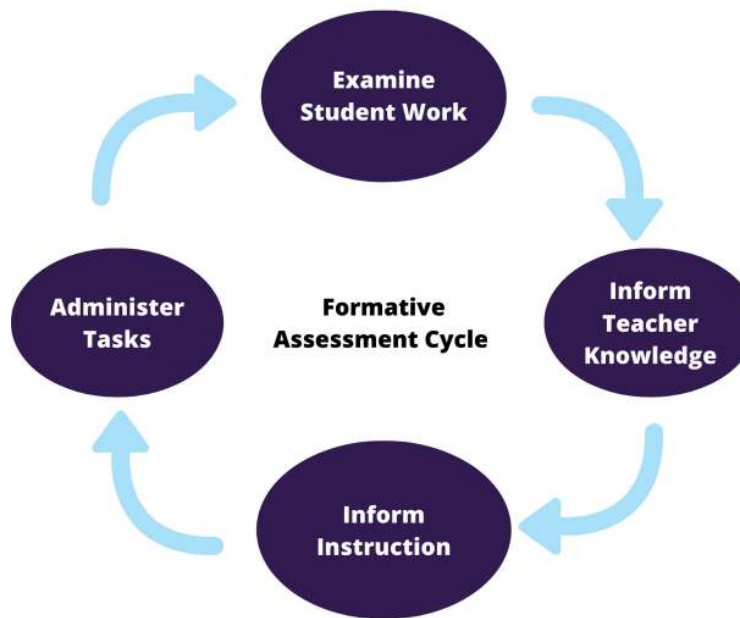


Figure 6.8 Formative Assessment Cycle . [75]

Summative Assessments

In primary grades, summative assessment, often called high-stakes assessments, are designed to measure a child's overall developmental progress at the end of a school year. These assessments can also be administered at certain grade levels for state or local accountability purposes (e.g. Blue-Ribbon Recognition). Summative assessments seek to measure a child's academic performance. Scores are published and parents are notified of their child's individual score along with their child's percentile ranking as compared to other children who are in the same grade. In early care and education however, summative assessments essentially look back to see how effective the teacher or program is at providing high-quality care. This is form of assessment allows families, teachers and administrators to evaluate instruction practices, curriculum, and whether a child is in need of intervention or teachers are in need of professional development. These assessments help recognize whether or not the child has fallen short of, met, or exceeded the expected standards. Although the results of formative assessments are primarily of interest to teachers, families are eager to know how their child is doing socially and academically. Administrators can utilize the assessment information to identify strengths and challenges of curriculum and instruction, in order to make improvements on the next year's program policies or procedures.

How are Assessments are Used

Planning Curriculum- Teachers use assessments to understand a child's capabilities and needs. By focusing on what a child can do, teachers then establish individualized goals for that child. By continuing to observe and document milestones, teachers can proactively assess a child's development and adjust the curriculum accordingly. For example, if a teacher determines that a child needs support in their fine motor development, activities that exercise the pincer grasp will be implemented.

Documentation on behavior should be considered when planning curriculum. If data shows reoccurring conflict taking place in a specific area, teachers should assess if there are enough materials and space in that area, and decide if the materials provided are age-appropriate. For example, after reviewing the data, the teachers concluded that conflict was occurring in the dramatic play area because there were not enough baby dolls for the number of children playing at the same time.

Ensuring School Readiness - Whether you use checklists or the DRDP, both assessments will collect data about milestones of development. Recording a child's progress for each domain of development will determine school readiness. School readiness refers to children having enough knowledge and experience to succeed in a kindergarten classroom.

Adjusting the Classroom - Assessments can also be used to adjust teaching styles, classroom setups, daily schedules, and routines. When observing children, teachers should document how the class responds to certain routines, transitions, and language. For

example, if the data collected shows that children are having a difficult time falling asleep during nap time, the daily schedule can be adjusted to allow more outdoor play before nap time.

Data can also show us why certain behaviors are occurring. When reviewing data, evaluate what happens before the behavior is observed, and assess what changes can be made to redirect the child. For example, if conflict and running in the classroom are occurring in the morning, the parent drop-off could be moved to the outdoor classroom to allow a large space for children to play and interact before going inside. ^[76]

Pin It!

Further Information on Authentic Observation and Assessment

- Read this article for more information on [New Learnings in Early Care and Education](https://www.first5la.org/article/new-learnings-in-early-care-and-education/) : <https://www.first5la.org/article/new-learnings-in-early-care-and-education/>
- Watch this video to learn more about [authentic assessment](https://www.cde.state.co.us/resultsmatter/whatisauthenticassessment-player) : <https://www.cde.state.co.us/resultsmatter/whatisauthenticassessment-player>
- Read this report from National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) for more information on [balanced preschool assessment](http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/7-1.pdf) : <http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/7-1.pdf>
- Watch this video to learn more about [Organizing for Assessment in ECE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfHERCVabw) : - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfHERCVabw>

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9.4: Family Conferences

Conferences Building Family Partnerships

Once assessments have been completed, it is time to meet with a child's family. The purpose of the conference is to share information about the child and to build a vital partnership with the child's family. Some parents may not understand the connection between play and learning. Sharing information about play-based curriculum and how it supports development can allow parents to better understand your goals for learning and how the classroom functions. By including parents in discussion making about curriculum and assessments we can encourage support areas development outside of the classroom.

For example, if the individualized curriculum is supporting color recognition, we can suggest that families continue to support this skill by identifying produce colors at the grocery store and/or pointing to certain colors in their favorite books.

In a blog by Concordia University, Portland some key tips are suggested to ensure a successful and engaging family conference occurs: ^[77]

1. Offer a flexible conference schedule

Some parents have more than one child at different schools, some families may have limited transportation options and some parents may work multiple jobs which can limit their time and availability. In these cases, teachers may need to be flexible to accommodate special circumstances. Teachers can schedule conferences in the morning, later in the afternoon, or during recess breaks. If technology is available, meetings can be offered via Skype or FaceTime as an option for parents who cannot make it to school.

2. Prepare, prepare, prepare

Portfolios and assessments must be updated and organized for each child on a regular basis.

3. Arrange for a translator if needed, and find a way to connect

Parents who don't speak English require a translator. If schools cannot arrange for a translator, family members may need to sit in on the conference, for example an older sibling or an aunt or maybe even a neighbor) — ideally not a student.

When there is a language barrier, teachers should try to find a respectful way to communicate and connect with families. As a reminder, even though families cannot fluently speak the same language, they deserve your professional approach. Try learning a few phrases in their native language to show you're trying to connect; even "Hello," "How are you?" and "Thank you" can go a long way.

4. Be aware of your body language and how you verbally communicate

The classroom environment speaks volumes and so does your body language and how you talk with your families. Check out your body language. Are your arms typically crossed? Do you smile or glare? How is your tone when you speak? Are you calm and reassuring, or sounding like a robot? Do you pause and allow parents to ask questions, or are you hurried and rushing through information? Are you aware and considerate of cultural backgrounds and family practices? For example, did you know that eye contact and handshaking may not be a common practice with some families?

5. Sit side-by-side

Since teachers and parents are on the same team teachers are advised to sit next to parents rather than across from them behind a desk. By arranging the furniture in a friendly and non-threatening way, teachers express their desire to build a partnership with each parent, which can diffuse unnecessary tension on both sides.

6. Share real stories and student work

Even the best teachers can't remember all of the details they need to share with every parent. A portfolio with anecdotal notes and work samples provide parents with real insight into what's happening in their child's academic day.

7. Include the positive and focus on what the child CAN DO

Each student has positive traits and potential. Share at least one shining trait with parents at the beginning and another at the end of the conference. That trait could be an academic trait or a character trait, such as helpfulness, persistence, or hard work. Teachers can follow the “sandwich method” or the “glows and grows” method where you share a child’s positive achievements or traits that make them glow, in addition to providing two or more areas in which they can grow. Always end on a high note with another glowing detail or anecdote.

8. Create clear goals

Every student, even the gifted ones, can improve in some way. Write specific goals for each student. Along with those goals, create an action plan with steps for improvement, as well as a timeline. Your plan of action should include activities that will be done at school as well as activities that can be done at home. Sharing this with parents can increase buy-in since they will be able to see a clear path to success that has achievable benchmarks and goals that are part of a realistic, structured plan.

9. Avoid education jargon

Not everyone is familiar with DRDPs or diagnostic and summative assessments. Avoid overwhelming parents with [education lingo](#). Speak in plain terms, explain what you mean, and make sure parents are clear about the information you have presented. Encourage parents to ask questions as needed for clarification.

10. Give parents responsibility

Early educators know that children do better in school when their parents are involved. A perfect way to get parents involved is to ask questions about family life and routines (a family questionnaire is ideal). Families should be encouraged to get involved throughout the school year. For example, they can be special guests, and talk about their jobs or they can read their favorite story to the children. Parents who are involved early on, will be more likely to follow through on their “plan of action” once it is presented at the conference.

11. Encourage questions

Approachable teachers build a lasting connection with parents and promote a positive learning experience with their children. Not only do you want your students to feel comfortable enough to ask questions, but you want your parents to feel they can approach you as well. Although your time may be limited during the school day, it is important to carve out some time and space to discuss important matters with parents. If parents cannot make the conference, offer your email address to allow for some time for a brief “q and a” any point during the school year. NOTE: Hitting parents up at the end of a long work day and rushing through important details regarding their child is NOT recommended.

12. Don't make assumptions about parents or students

Avoid relying on stereotypes and allowing personal biases to cloud your judgment. View all parents as partners because, like it or not, they are. Work to make sure that even the most challenging students and parents feel like they are welcomed and a part of the team.

13. If a parent becomes hostile, don't engage

No matter how prepared, pleasant and affirming you are, some parents may become hostile or upset while at the conference, especially if there are areas of concern or issues with a child’s challenging behavior that need to be addressed. Some parents may be upset by hearing bad news, other parents don’t trust or have little regard for teachers, some parents feel a need to defend their child, while other parents may be upset about a personal matter and may take their frustration out on you. Remain calm! If possible, let the parent vent. Use active listening and really listen to the parent’s concerns. Discuss how both parties want what’s best for the child and reassure them that you have their child’s interest at heart. Look for a compromise or strategy that best supports the child and their family. Stay focused on the task at hand – the conference – and reemphasize the positive. Sometimes, a follow-up meeting may need to be scheduled.

14. Remain professional at all times

Teaching is a challenging job. Like parents, you may have an off day and you may be tempted to stray off into an unprofessional area. We also may cross some fine lines and become “friends” with our families. Here are some topics that should never be

discussed with families during a conference (or at any time):

- -Speaking negatively about school administrators or other teachers.
- -Comparing two or more students to each other.
- -Discussing another student's behavior, family, or performance.
- -Blaming parents for a child's academic performance or behavior.
- -Arguing or becoming hostile with parents.
- -Complaining about school policies or procedures.

15. Document, document, document

Because you will meet with several families in the course of a week, it is a good idea to make notes about the conversations and outcomes of the conference. You may need to refer to them at a later time when planning a follow-up meeting, or when planning additional curriculum activities. Once in a while, a parent may notify your administrator that they have concerns about the information that was shared during the conference and your notes can be shared with your administrator to help see both sides of the conversation.

16. Stay in contact with parents

Parents should be able to get in touch with you to follow up or address new concerns. Email is the most convenient way for you to receive messages and respond to parents, but phone calls or future conferences may be necessary, too. Set the guidelines and boundaries for future communications.

According to Seplocha, teachers have many important responsibilities, especially preparing for effective and engaging parent-teacher conferences. When teachers connect with family members and establish a respectful relationship, the positive outcome provides a lifeline that will ultimately support a child's overall development and learning.



Figure 6.9 Carol Mahn (right), a first grade teacher at the Hanscom Primary School, meets Melissa Weyand and her son, Maximas, during a "Meet and Greet". ^[78]

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9.5: Conclusion and References

This chapter emphasizes the importance of making learning visible through tools like documentation boards and portfolios, which showcase not only the final products of children's work but also the learning processes behind them. Various types of assessments—screening, diagnostic, formative, and summative—each have a role in informing instruction, ensuring accountability, and fostering school-family partnerships. It is critical for teachers to use for intentional practices when conducting assessments that respect the whole child, highlight the value of play-based learning, acknowledge the essential role parents play as their child's first teacher, and promote collaboration between educators and families.

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Index

A

Aaron's example

[5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#)

Abecedarian Project

[3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)

academic progress

[9.1: Introduction](#)

academic success

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

accountability

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

accreditation

[3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#)

achievement gap

[3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)

[3.8: Conclusion and References](#)

achievement scores

[3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)

active learning

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

advocates

[3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)

affordability

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

anecdotal notes

[5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#)

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

anecdotal record

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

assessing children

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

assessment

[5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#)

[9.1: Introduction](#)

assessment techniques

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

assessment tools

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

atypical development

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

authentic assessment

[9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress](#)

availability

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

B

baseline data

[5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#)

[5.2: Understanding the Child](#)

best practices

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

C

California childcare regulations

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

California Code of Regulations

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

California Department of Education

[5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#)

California licensing

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

caregiver interaction

[3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#)

checklists

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

child and family support

[3.8: Conclusion and References](#)

child assessment

[9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress](#)

child behavior

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

child development

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

[3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality](#)

[Practices](#)

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

[3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#)

[3.8: Conclusion and References](#)

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

[9.4: Family Conferences](#)

child documentation

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

child learning

[9.1: Introduction](#)

child learning outcomes

[3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap](#)

Child Observation

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

child outcomes

[3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#)

child safety

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

childcare

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

childcare health and safety

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

childcare licensing

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

childcare program operation

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

childcare space requirements

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

children and families

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

children's artwork

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

children's portfolios

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

Class

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

class size

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

CLASS tool

[3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#)

classroom assessment

[3.8: Conclusion and References](#)

classroom communication

[9.1: Introduction](#)

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

[Art](#)

classroom decoration

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

[Art](#)

classroom environment

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

[3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality](#)

[Practices](#)

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

[Art](#)

classroom observation

[5.3: Let's Get Started](#)

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

[9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress](#)

cognitive development

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

[9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress](#)

cognitive milestones

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

[Art](#)

cognitive skills

[5.2: Understanding the Child](#)

communication tips

[9.4: Family Conferences](#)

Community Care Licensing

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

compliance standards

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

cost

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

cultural consideration

[3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices](#)

cultural practices

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

cultural responsiveness

[3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#)

cultural sensitivity

[9.4: Family Conferences](#)

curriculum model

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

curriculum planning

[5.2: Understanding the Child](#)

[9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress](#)

D

daily activities

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

developmental assessment

5.2: Understanding the Child

developmental domains

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

developmental evaluation

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

developmental milestones

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data
5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques
9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

developmental tracking

5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

developmentally appropriate activities

5.5: Conclusion and References

developmentally appropriate practice

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

developmentally appropriate practices

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

diagnostic assessment

9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

documentation

9.1: Introduction
9.4: Family Conferences

documentation board

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

documentation boards

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

documentation processes

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

documentation storage

5.3: Let's Get Started

DRDP

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data

E

early childhood education

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

early childhood education compliance

3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices

early childhood standards

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

early learning

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

early learning policies

3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices

early learning standards

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

early literacy

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data

ECERS

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices
3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

education jargon

9.4: Family Conferences

educational displays

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

educational documentation

5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

educational materials

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

educational policy

3.8: Conclusion and References

educational posters

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

educational practices

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

educational quality

3.8: Conclusion and References

educators

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

emotional development

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices
5.2: Understanding the Child

English learners

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

enriched learning environment

3.8: Conclusion and References

environment

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

Environment Rating Scales

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

Environment Rating Scales (ERS)

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

ERS

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

essentials for observation

5.3: Let's Get Started

ethical pedagogy

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

evidence of learning

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

F

family childcare

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

family engagement

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

9.1: Introduction

family partnerships

9.4: Family Conferences

fine motor skills

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data

flexible scheduling

9.4: Family Conferences

formative assessment

9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

frequency count

5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

frequency counts

5.5: Conclusion and References

funding opportunities

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

G

goal setting

9.4: Family Conferences

guidance policies

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

H

handling hostility

9.4: Family Conferences

health and safety standards

3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices

high school graduation

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

hours of operation

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

I

individual needs

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

individualized goals

9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

individualized learning

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality
5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data

industry practices

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

informal observation

5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

intentional teaching

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data
5.3: Let's Get Started
5.5: Conclusion and References
9.1: Introduction

interests and abilities

5.2: Understanding the Child

L

language development

5.2: Understanding the Child
9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

learning approaches

5.2: Understanding the Child

learning progression

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data

learning stories

5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

learning story

5.5: Conclusion and References

learning strategies

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

learning through play

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

licensing inspection

3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices

linguistic diversity

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

location

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

M

math and reading

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

meaningful interactions

3.8: Conclusion and References

N

NAEYC

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices
3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

NAEYC DAP Framework

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

nurturing environments

3.8: Conclusion and References

O

observation

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data
9.1: Introduction

observation and documentation

3.8: Conclusion and References

observation methods

5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

observation techniques

5.2: Understanding the Child

observation templates

5.3: Let's Get Started

observation tools

5.3: Let's Get Started
5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

observational assessment

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

observational tools

5.5: Conclusion and References

ongoing communication

9.4: Family Conferences

P

parent involvement

9.4: Family Conferences

parental engagement

9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art

Perry Preschool

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

personality

5.2: Understanding the Child

physical development

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices
5.2: Understanding the Child
9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

planned observation

5.3: Let's Get Started

play space

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

policy makers

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

positive child outcomes

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

positive feedback

9.4: Family Conferences

poverty

3.8: Conclusion and References

preschool

5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data

preschool program

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

preschool programs

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

preschool quality

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

process quality

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

professional organization

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

professionalism

9.4: Family Conferences

program assessment

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

3.8: Conclusion and References

program effectiveness

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

program evaluation

9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

program quality

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

Q

QRIS

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices
3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

quality education

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

quality improvement

3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms

quality learning experiences

9.1: Introduction

quality rating system

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

quantitative research

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

R

respectful relationships

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

responsive caregiving

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

running record

5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques

S

safe environments

3.8: Conclusion and References

school philosophy

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

school readiness

9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

screening

5.2: Understanding the Child

screening tools

9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

social competence

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

social development

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

social skills

5.2: Understanding the Child

social strategies

5.2: Understanding the Child

socioeconomic status

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap
3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

special education

3.1: Closing the Achievement Gap

special needs

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

spontaneous observation

5.3: Let's Get Started

stakeholders

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

standard industry practice

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

state licensing

3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices

state licensing procedures

3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices

structural quality

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

summative assessment

9.3: Assessing and Reporting Children's Development and Progress

supervision standards

3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices

T

teacher education

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

teacher effectiveness

3.8: Conclusion and References

teacher experience

3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike

teacher interactions

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

teacher observation

5.3: Let's Get Started

teacher pay scale

3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality

teacher preparation

3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices

teacher preparedness

[5.3: Let's Get Started](#)

teacher qualifications

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

teacher roles

[3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices](#)

teacher wages

[3.3: Process Quality and Structural Quality](#)

teachers and administrators

[3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#)

teaching practices

[3.8: Conclusion and References](#)

teaching strategies

[5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#)

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

[9.2: Documentation Boards - Not Just for Displaying Art](#)

technology in education

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

temperament

[5.2: Understanding the Child](#)

Title 22 regulations

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

[3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#)

traditional preschool

[3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#)

translator

[9.4: Family Conferences](#)

typical development

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

W

whole child development

[9.1: Introduction](#)

whole child support

[5.2: Understanding the Child](#)

work sample

[5.5: Conclusion and References](#)

work samples

[5.4: A Closer Look at Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques](#)

Glossary

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

Appendix: Additional Instructional Materials

Chapter One: Introduction to Assessment and its Many Purposes in Early Childhood Education

- [Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement](#) (NAEYC 2019)
- [Code of Ethics for Early Childhood Educators \(Draft Revision\)](#) (NAEYC 2024)
- [Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation](#) (NAEYC 2003)
- [Early Childhood Inclusion: A Position Statement](#) (NAEYC and DEC 2009)
- [Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators: A Position Statement](#) (NAEYC 2020)
- [Screening and Assessment of Young English Language Learners](#) (NAEYC and NAECS/SDE 2005)
- [Early Childhood Recommended Practices Module 7: Assessment](#)
- Jones, J. 2018. Reframing the assessment discussion. *Spotlight on Young Children: Observation and Assessment*. NAEYC. <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/pubs/spotlight-obs-assess-jones.pdf>

Chapter Two: Education, Assessment, and the Law

- [Educational Rights and Responsibilities: Understanding Special Education in Illinois “THE PARENT GUIDE”](#) (Illinois State Board of Education, Special Education Department, 2020)
- [Training Curriculum on Part B of IDEA, Building the Legacy/Construyendo el Legado](#) (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2020)
- [Building the Legacy for Our Youngest Children with Disabilities, A Training Curriculum on IDEA's Part C](#) (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2017)
- [FERPA 101: For Local Education Agencies](#) (US Department of Education, 2024)
- [Wright's Law](#) - Information about legal cases and information pertaining to special education.

Chapter Three: Quality Counts

- Administration for Children & Families (ACF) – QRIS Evaluation Toolkit <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/qris-evaluation-toolkit>
- NAEYC – Quality Rating and Improvement Systems <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/qris>
- Environment Rating Scales Institute (ERSI) <https://www.ersi.info>
- University of Georgia Cooperative Extension – “What Does Quality Look Like?” <https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=C1054>
- NIEER – Quality Standards Overview <https://nieer.org/impact-areas/quality-standards>
- NIEER – Benchmarks for High-Quality Pre-K <https://nieer.org/research-library/download-nieers-benchmarks-high-quality-pre-k>
- Harvard Center on the Developing Child – Early Childhood Program Evaluations: A Decision-Maker’s Guide https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Decision_Guide.pdf
- Pyramid Model Online Courses <https://www.pyramidmodel.org/online-courses-epyrmaid/>
- Understanding Inclusion Virtual Course from Early CHOICES (IL) <https://www.eclre.org/course/understanding-inclusion/>

Chapter Four: Observation and Documentation - The Key to Intentional Teaching

- "Wondering with Children: The Importance of Observation in Early Education" <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1084856.pdf>
- "Anecdotal Records: Practical Strategies for Taking Meaningful Notes" by Bates, C. C., Madison, S. M., and H. J. Hoover. <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/pubs/spotlight-observation-assessment-vol-2-bates.pdf>
- Collecting and Using Anecdotal Records [Video]. Head Start. <https://headstart.gov/video/collecting-using-anecdotal-records>
- Learning to Teach: Observing and Reflecting from Bank Street College of Education <https://www.bankstreet.edu/research-publications-policy/snapshots-of-practice/learning-to-teach-observing-and-reflecting/>
- Observing Young Children - Eastern Connecticut State University E-Clip <https://www.easternct.edu/center-for-early-childhood-education/e-clips/observing-young-children.html>
- Observing Infants and Toddlers - CCDMD by Mary Johnson, Vanier College <http://toddlers.ccdmd.qc.ca/observing>

Chapter Five: Using Authentic Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques to Gather Evidence

- Documenting Children: Types/Samples (Illinois Gateways to Opportunities)<https://www.ilgateways.com/docman-docs/faculty-resources/ece-resources/2726-oa-1-documenting-childrens-learning-examples/file>
- Course Enhancement Module: Authentic Assessment (ECPC) <https://ecpcta.org/authentic-assessment/>
- IRIS Center: Case Study Unit - Measuring Behavior
https://specialeducationdata.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/7/3/13733774/measuring_behavior.pdf
- IRIS Center: Behavior Assessment - Duration and Latency Recordinghttps://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf_activities/independent/IA_Duration_and_Latency_Recording.pdf
- Teacher Tools Related to Data-Based Decision Making (University of Kansas)
https://specialconnections.ku.edu/assessment/data_based_decision_making/teacher_tools
- IEP-Q (UIUC) - Behavior Observation Tally Sheethttps://iep.q.education.illinois.edu/documents/Chart_35.pdf
- IEP-Q (UIUC) - Rate Data Summary Sheethttps://iep.q.education.illinois.edu/documents/Chart_34.pdf

Chapter Six: How to Plan Effective and Meaningful Curriculum and Instruction

Chapter Seven: Using Standardized Assessment Tools - Characteristics, Methods and Techniques

- Early Intervention Training Program. 2022. *The Developmental Assessment of Young Children - 2nd Edition (DAYC-2)*. Training Packet. <https://eitp.education.illinois.edu/Files/Webinars/DAYC2packet.pdf>

Chapter Eight: The Purpose, Process and Practice of Progress Monitoring, Screening and Evaluating for Determining Eligibility for Special Education Support and Services

- Division of Early Childhood. 2022. *Position Statement: Multitiered Systems of Support Framework in Early Childhood*.
<https://www.dec-sped.org/single-post/new-position-statement-multitiered-system-of-support-framework-in-early-childhood>
- Washington State Office of Instruction. 2008. *A Guide to Early Childhood Assessment*.
https://ospi.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/2022-12/assessment_print.pdf

Chapter Nine: Collaborating and Partnering with Families for Purposes of Assessment

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 - [1.6: Conclusion and References](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [2.3: Every Student Succeeds Act \(2016\)](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [2.5: Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act \(FERPA\)](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [2.6: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(2004\)](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [2.7: Inclusion of Young Children with Disabilities](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.8: Conclusion and References](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [4.1: The Role of Observation](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.2: Becoming a Skilled Observer](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.3: Observations Can Be Spontaneous or Planned](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.4: Questions You May Want to Ask Yourself As You Plan Your Next Observation](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.5: The Role of Documentation](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.6: Objective Versus Subjective Observation Evidence](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.7: Recognizing Your Biases](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.8: Ethical Guidelines When Observing Children](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.9: Observation and Documentation Dos and Don'ts](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.10: Conclusion and References](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [5: Using Authentic Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques to Gather Evidence](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [5.3: Let's Get Started](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)

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- Back Matter - *Undeclared*
 - Index - *Undeclared*
 - Glossary - *Undeclared*
 - Appendix: Additional Instructional Materials - *Undeclared*
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 - [1.3: Assessment as a Critical Component of Early Childhood Education and Practice](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [1.5: Six Purposes of Early Childhood Assessment](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [1.6: Conclusion and References](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [3.2: Not all Preschool Programs are Alike](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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 - [3.4: A Look at Standard Industry Practices](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.5: The Role of the Teacher in High-Quality Practices](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.6: A Look at High-Quality Practices](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.7: Measuring High-Quality in Early Care and Education Classrooms](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [3.8: Conclusion and References](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4: Observation and Documentation - The Key to Intentional Teaching](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.1: The Role of Observation](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.2: Becoming a Skilled Observer](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.3: Observations Can Be Spontaneous or Planned](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.4: Questions You May Want to Ask Yourself As You Plan Your Next Observation](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.5: The Role of Documentation](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.6: Objective Versus Subjective Observation Evidence](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.7: Recognizing Your Biases](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.8: Ethical Guidelines When Observing Children](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.9: Observation and Documentation Dos and Don'ts](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [4.10: Conclusion and References](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [5: Using Authentic Observation Methods, Tools and Techniques to Gather Evidence](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [5.1: Taking the First Step - Gathering Baseline Data](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
 - [5.2: Understanding the Child](#) - [CC BY 4.0](#)
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- Back Matter - *Undeclared*
 - Index - *Undeclared*
 - Glossary - *Undeclared*
 - Appendix: Additional Instructional Materials - *Undeclared*
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