

Standards, assessments, and portfolios: **Getting started**

Which of these describes you and your program?

My program administers pre-admission evaluations to all children to make sure they meet strong entrance criteria. Children are tested regularly to make sure they are learning. Parents must make an appointment before visiting.

Children spend time with me doing whatever they please. Learning can wait for public school. Parents don't ask about how their children are doing.

I observe children and use observation notes to plan activities that I think children will enjoy while they develop physical, emotional, cognitive, and social skills. I meet with parents regularly.

I use lesson plans from a book, and little changes year to year—all children are the same, after all. Sometimes parents come along on field trips.

My program uses a set of criteria to make sure teachers are prepared to help children learn in age and developmentally appropriate ways. Parents are welcome in the classroom anytime.

We have regular staff meetings to make sure all teachers follow the planned curriculum. Parents have a copy of the plan but seldom ask questions about it.



Standards—that powerful buzz word in elementary and secondary education—have trickled down to the traditionally exempt world of early care and education. Today, teacher preparation, program quality, and curriculum content are addressed in federal, state, and local legislation; parent-teacher forums; and professional seminars.

Do standards mean that all children have to learn in the same way, at the same time, everywhere? Does having standards mean that every playground, every classroom, and every curriculum will be identical? Does using standards mean that all early childhood education programs will have evaluations, tests, and a one-size-fits-all curriculum?

The answer to these questions is a firm no.

But if early childhood programs have a purpose beyond keeping children safe while parents work, and if programs are sincerely interested in the development, support, and well-being of young children, standards are essential. Standards set and reinforce a program's responsibility to understand how children learn and mark their growth and development. In addition, standards enable teachers to plan curriculum to support optimum growth and communicate with children's families.

Standards in public education continue to be a political hot potato. Reform movements arise, legislation is passed, and competency measures are set.

While early childhood educators originally distanced themselves from the standards movement, many in the field (educators, academics, public health advocates, policy makers, and parents) are now working to set standards for teacher preparation, program administration, curriculum, assessment, and parent/family communication (Seefeldt 2005).

Two voluntary membership organizations, the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Association for Childhood Education International, have led the way in identifying and formalizing a framework for program, teacher preparation, and curriculum standards. Standards for federally funded early care and education programs like Head Start are in place, but no universal standards are mandated for all early childhood programs.

So how does a program get started with standards? There is an efficient, ethical, and cost-effective entry into the maze: Start with the children. Gather the evidence that documents children's growth, use the evidence to plan meaningful learning experiences, and share the results with children's families.

Measuring growth

How do we measure growth? Clearly the appropriate tool must relate to what we are measuring. A yardstick and a scale give us information about the physical size of objects. The gas gauge on a car's

Words to know

Standards—levels of quality that are required or recognized as acceptable. Example: Licensing standards require that caregivers know how to use a fire extinguisher.

Assessment—the process of gathering, organizing, and interpreting information about children's growth and development. Example: An assessment of David's language skills indicated the need for a referral to a speech therapist.

Portfolio—a purposeful collection of evidence, gathered over time, that verifies a child's growth and development. It may consist of work samples, observations, checklists, self-portraits, anecdotal records, logs, photographs, interviews, and even video or tape recordings, for example.



dashboard indicates the distance one can travel without buying more fuel. Unfortunately, early childhood educators are often pressed to measure children's growth using inappropriate tools.

Historically, quality early childhood programs have relied on child observation and assessment. Teachers use comprehensive, multi-faceted assessment strategies to produce a valid, authentic picture of a child's development and skills. Teachers argue that a child's unique talents, interests, and progress are best documented by gathering multiple sources of information and reviewing the information regularly.

They recognize that uneven development across the physical, social, cognitive, and emotional domains is normal and expected. Further, they hold that high-stakes testing, rating scales, and other formal evaluations pressure teachers to teach to the test—not to the natural, individual, experiential, and fluid ways young children grow and learn.

Get a checklist of milestones

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offer a printable checklist of developmental milestones. Go to www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/actearly/ and click on an age in the right-hand column.

Electronic evidence

Many programs use video cameras, audio tape recorders, digital cameras, and computers to document classroom activities. Consider the following suggestions.

- Record conversations with children to evaluate language and vocabulary development as well as background knowledge and a child's thought processes and focus. Ask each parent to provide one tape, labeled with the child's name. When you record a conversation, introduce the topic and state the date. Add to the tape throughout the year.
- Use a digital camera to document children's individual work samples as well as group projects. Take photographs of projects as they develop. Take before and after shots. Make sure your photos document concrete processes and children's active engagement—not just a pose with a finished product. Ask yourself, "What do I want this photo to say about this child's development?" Save all documentation to disk.
- Videotape children discussing their work samples or presenting their portfolios. Use clips of the tape to share information about assessment in a parent meeting.

What does assessment look like in early childhood classrooms? Effective assessment—taking stock of a child's growth and development—is the process of gathering, organizing, and interpreting information about children.

Assessment relies on gathering several forms of evidence—signs or indications—about a child's development or learning (McAfee et al, 2004). No single source of evidence (a standardized test or a single observation) is ever adequate in assessment.

Assessment has four significant functions. It allows all teachers to

- identify a child's current knowledge and skills,
- plan for children's needs and strengths,
- identify areas in which a child might require special services, and
- share information about children with their parents.

Without assessment, how do we know what to do? How do we know what works? Certainly most children give us clues about their interests and needs. But are we serving children well when we acknowledge a child's encyclopedic knowledge of



dinosaurs and ignore aggression and an inability to play with other children?

Assessment provides a picture of children that can direct a teacher's planning both for individual children and for the group. It also provides the support documents that enable teachers to share meaningful and descriptive information with parents.

In many early care and education programs, the goal is authentic assessment—using tools that document a child's growth and development over time and in real-life situations. The result is an individualized, accurate, and always current picture of a child.

Gathering evidence and documenting growth

As a tape measure is to successful carpentry, developmental milestones are to assessment. Developmental milestones are the result of clinical and real-life observations that describe the physical/motor, social, emotional, and cognitive/language skills most children have achieved at a particular age.

Developmental milestones describe—simply and concretely—the differences between 2- and 4-year-old children or the red flags that point to developmental delays, for example. Without knowledge of developmental milestones, teachers have no starting point, no framework for determining expectations and developing curriculum plans for a group of children.

Early childhood educators emphasize discovering what a child already knows and is able to do. They gather information from multiple sources to produce an authentic assessment of a child's skills. This gathering process, using simple and available tools, gives teachers a much more accurate picture of a young child's abilities than testing in a sterile, formal setting.

Math skills, for example, are most effectively evaluated through daily observations and conversations with a child building with unit blocks, balancing counting bears, ordering pencils by length, and completing jigsaw puzzles.

In authentic assessment teachers collect and document children's work and behavioral samples (or evidence) in real-life settings. Each of the following sources of evidence has pros and cons. The sources you use will depend upon your program and classroom structure, the ages of children, the purpose of the assessment, and your skills and comfort.

Each provides some information but remember, it's the combination of information from different sources that gives the best picture of a child.

Developmental checklists

- A checklist is a systematic, printed tool that allows teachers to measure the basic skills most children have at a particular age or developmental stage. Checklists cover all domains, are easy to use, and are available from many sources for free.
- To be an effective tool, the checklist must be dated and updated regularly to supplement other sources of evidence.

Interviews and conferences

- Interviews are personal, guided conversations that allow teachers to gather information about a child. An interview with any significant adult in the child's life—a parent, grandparent, sibling, or mentor—can provide information from the family's perspective. Dated, purposeful interviews with children can provide information on concept development, language and social skills, personality, and interests.
- Open-ended interview questions are an easy and effective way to gather information. Requests such as "Tell me what you know about pets" can give teachers information on language ability, background knowledge, and experience.



- Successful interviews—and relationships with adults and children—rely on whether the teacher can keep confidential or sensitive information private.

Self-portrait

- Asking a child (from 3 to 8 years old) to draw a self-portrait gives teachers information about the child's fine-motor skills and body awareness. The self-portrait is not appropriate as a psychological diagnostic tool in the classroom.
- To get an accurate picture of the child, the self-portrait exercise should be repeated regularly.

Anecdotal records

- Anecdotal records are dated, short notes that document specific skills or activities. They allow teachers to identify and watch for specific attributes—sorting pegs by color, length of sentences, or friendships in peer groups, for example. Effective records are objective observations, not opinion or analysis. They quote a child's words exactly or describe what a child does as observable fact. "The child stood with clinched fists," not "The child seemed angry."
- Dated anecdotal records provide a continuous chronological picture of a child's development.

Work samples

- Work samples create a picture of development across domains. Work samples may include artwork, journals, scribbles and writing, and photographs of work (measuring a flower bed, constructing with unit blocks, or balancing on one foot, for example). Always date work samples accurately.
- Invite children to participate in the decision about which samples are saved. This conferencing helps children begin to evaluate their work and allows them to discuss (and dictate) the steps that went into completing the project.
- Collect work samples often and regularly.

Evaluating growth and development

Effective assessment includes responding to the collection of evidence of each child's growth—comparing your documentation on each child against age and developmentally appropriate milestones or standards. Without evaluating, you may have a fine pile of notes and records but nothing that guides you in planning for children's needs, evaluating your teaching strategies, tracking a child's progress, or identifying a child's need for support services.

Like developmental milestones, standards are developed to provide a framework of consistent expectations for children at specific ages and developmental levels. Because each child is unique, however, teachers must mold instruction to fit each child's individual strengths and needs. Effective assessment can guide instructional practices, helping teachers invent, blend, and modify strategies to meet the needs of every child.

Collections of standards

The following organizations publish position papers, standards, guidelines, criteria, and benchmarks that help teachers evaluate children's growth and skill development.

- National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation criteria at www.naeyc.org
- Association for Childhood Education International global guidelines at www.acei.org
- CTB/McGraw-Hill (with the Carnegie Corporation) at www.CTB.com

Building portfolios

Because assessment relies on gathering evidence of children's development from multiple sources, many teachers use portfolios to assemble and store the record of a child's growth. A portfolio is a purposeful collection of evidence, gathered over time that verifies a child's growth and development. It exists to help make sense of a child's work. It enables children, and their teachers and parents, to observe and assess developmental and skill progress over a stated time. The portfolio is always in process, never a final product.

NO SINGLE SOURCE OF EVIDENCE IS EVER ADEQUATE IN ASSESSMENT.

More simply, a portfolio is an organizational tool for assessment evidence—work samples, observations, checklists, self-portraits, anecdotal records, logs, photographs, interviews, and even video or tape recordings, for example.

Basic guidelines for portfolio maintenance include:

- Have one portfolio for each child. Allow children to have a say in what is included. If children have different teachers for special activities like music or gym, incorporate all assessment documents into a single portfolio.
- Use whatever storage unit suits your classroom space. File folders, accordion falls, poster board folders, artist portfolios, and large plastic bags with hangers work. Use portfolio units that store work samples without folding. If the work is too big to store, take a picture of it. Choose portfolio units that can withstand frequent handling—by you and the children.
- Organize the materials in the portfolios chronologically. Even if you use categories such as curriculum area or developmental domain, maintain the time sequence.

Sharing children's work

Organized portfolios allow you to evaluate each child's achievements, developing skills, and possible red flags. Use the portfolio of assessment evidence to compare the child's current work with earlier work—never one child against another. Do you see progress that is consistent across developmental milestones, your curriculum, and behavioral expectations? Are

there areas of achievement, ability, strength, weakness, and need?

Families want to know how their children are doing—how they learn, interact, and respond to success or disappointment. They appreciate concrete, specific examples of their child's work. Sharing a child's portfolio helps parents make a meaningful and personal connection to your teaching tasks; it builds parent-teacher partnerships that best support children. Ideally, a child's portfolio can be the concrete springboard or centerpiece in conferences with parents, teacher self-evaluation, curriculum planning, and ongoing classroom instruction.

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