Preface

Why This Book?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood as birth to age 8. Helping future early childhood educators learn about the complexities of assessment of this wide age range can be challenging. Developmentally appropriate assessment methods for infants and toddlers can be quite different than those used with second or third graders. While there are a variety of early childhood assessment textbooks available, they often must be supplemented with instructional materials because they do not cover this full age span. Current textbooks seem to focus on observational assessment methods for infants, toddlers, and preschool children or paper/pencil and standardized assessments for elementary-aged students. This textbook is designed to fill the gap and meet the needs instructors have for instructional materials on assessment methods for the full birth to age 8 range.

There is also a need for early childhood assessment instructional materials to be aligned with the standards of the profession. The content of this textbook is based upon the NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators. Because beginning early childhood teachers need to be prepared for assessment of children with all abilities, the content of this textbook is also aligned with the Division for Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC), Early Interventionist / Early Childhood Special Educator (EI/ECSE) Standards. Alignment with these two sets of standards ensures that the content of this textbook covers the essential knowledge and skills of assessment methodology beginning early childhood educators need to possess.

Approach

This textbook is designed for courses that prepare future early childhood caregivers or educators in the assessment of young children. Faculty in early childhood special education assessment courses may also find this textbook useful. These general early childhood, special education, and child development courses are often found in undergraduate programs at the associates or baccalaureate levels. This textbook and its activities have been created to be flexible for courses that are face-to-face, blended, or online. It is especially appropriate for educator preparation programs that are seeking or are maintaining NAEYC or DEC/CEC accreditation, with chapter learning objectives and assessments fully aligned with both professional preparation standards. This textbook would also be useful for both state teacher certificate programs and those that do not lead to a teaching certificate.

The major features of this book and the benefits of these features include:

- Vignettes at the beginning of each chapter
  - These realistic scenarios feature assessment examples for all three age levels: infant/toddler, preschool, and primary grades.
- Chapter learning objectives

- These objectives clearly describe what the learner should be able to do after reading, discussing, and doing assignments provided for each chapter. They are written using behavioral terms that can be measured and are helpful in writing course syllabi.

- NAEYC and DEC/CEC professional preparation standards
  - A list of the standards' alignment with chapter learning objectives is included at the beginning of each chapter. This is useful for course syllabi and accreditation purposes.

- Key terms
  - Important vocabulary terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader are bolded in the chapter, defined in the Glossary, and listed at the end of each chapter. These lists of key terms can be helpful to students in preparing for quizzes or exams.

- Figures, graphics, and realistic examples for user readability
  - Each chapter includes several figures or graphics that provide additional information, break up text sections, and increase reader interest. The chapters also include realistic examples of topics in the chapter. These examples are based upon the author's observations of teachers and young children in early childhood settings.

- Developmental milestones
  - Appendix A has charts that list the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's developmental milestones for ages 6, 12, 18, 24, and 30 months; 3, 4, and 5 years; and 6 to 8 years. These charts can be useful for student assignments that require them to compare children's assessment information to expected developmental knowledge or abilities.

Pedagogy

In addition to these features, there are pedagogical aids that are designed to support faculty in their instruction and assessment of students. These pedagogical features include:

- Connections activities
  - The chapters have Connections activities after each major section. These activities, which may be done in class or in an online discussion board, are designed to help students fully grasp the content of the topic or apply it to their own experiences.

- "Applying Your Knowledge" case studies
  - The chapters end with case studies and reflection questions that may be used for course assignments or exams. These case studies present challenges that early childhood educators face in assessing young children in the infant/toddler, preschool, and primary grade settings and require students to apply the information from the chapter.

- Chapter Learning Objectives Assessments
  - In addition to case studies, the chapters end with suggestions for assessments for each learning objective. These assessments can provide student learner outcome data for the course.

- Child Case Study

- Appendix B provides a major course assignment that can be used for a final project. This assignment includes a scoring rubric that is aligned with the NAEYC and DEC/CEC standards and may provide student data for accreditation reports. The activities done for this assignment may also provide evidence for the edTPA Early Childhood Assessment Task 3.

Additional Teaching Resources

Visit **collegepublishing.sagepub.com** and navigate to the Resources tab on your book's page to find the teaching materials designed to accompany this textbook. On this site you will find an array of materials that will save you time and help you keep students engaged, including:

- **Test banks**, aligned to Bloom's Taxonomy, that provide a diverse range of test items, including multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions;
- The **instructor's manual**, which offers a wide range of customizable teaching and learning content for all chapters, including:
  - Learning objectives
  - Listed NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators aligned with chapter material
  - A detailed chapter outline
  - Discussion questions
  - Lecture suggestions
  - Class activities and assignments
  - Essay and research paper topics
  - An essay and research paper grading rubric
  - A list of resources for further reading;
- **PowerPoint® slides** that offer a flexible, accessible, and customizable solution for creating multimedia lectures; and
- **Tables and Figures** from the book are available to support lecture preparation and class discussions.

Chapter 1

Introduction to Developmentally Appropriate Assessment Practices

Source: iStock.com/jacoblund.

Chapter Learning Objectives (CLO 1)

1.1 Define assessment as it relates to early childhood education.

1.2 Describe the major purposes of assessment in early childhood education.

1.3 Describe essential characteristics of developmentally appropriate assessment practices.

1.4 Explain the legal rights of children and their families relating to assessment.

1.5 Summarize the federal and state requirements for assessment of children birth through third grade in publicly funded programs or schools.

1.6 Explain ethical practices to use when assessing young children.

This chapter's content is aligned with the:

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)'s Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (2020b):

Standard 3a – Early childhood educators understand that the primary purpose of assessment is to inform instruction and planning in early learning settings.

Division for Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC), Early Interventionist / Early Childhood Special Educator (EI/ECSE) Standards (2020):

Standard 4.1 – Candidates understand the purposes of formal and informal assessment, including ethical and legal considerations, and use this information to choose developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate, valid, reliable tools and methods that are responsive to the characteristics of the young child, family, and program.

Introduction

As red-faced newborn Nora Grace cried and took her first breath, the efficient delivery room nurse checked her heart and respiratory rates, muscle tone, reflexes, and color. She recorded a score of 9 on a scale of 0–10 and repeated the check 10 minutes later, recording her second score of 10.

Head Start teacher Abby watched as PreK student Matteo drew an octopus. He counted out loud each leg on his drawing and announced: "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. I need 2 more!" Abby was surprised that Matteo not only knew the correct number of legs for his octopus, but that he knew 6 + 2 = 8. She made a note on the clipboard hanging next to the art center that Mateo had mastered the math skill of "adding on."

David's second-grade students wrote book reviews of their favorite book for a project in conjunction with the school library media specialist. They then created video commercials for the books to be shown in the library. David used a rubric to score whether their writing included an introductory statement of their opinion about the book, three supporting reasons for why it was a good book, and a conclusion.

When you hear the word "assessment," what comes to mind? Does it match any of the above examples, or does it only apply to tests—such as a spelling test in elementary school or a standardized test, such as the ACT or SAT, in high school? Are your feelings about the word negative, neutral, or positive? Assessment can have many different meanings, and often negative feelings are associated with the term. In this chapter, we will examine the basics of assessment in early childhood, noting how it can be beneficial in supporting young children's development and learning.

What Is Assessment in Early Childhood Education?

As noted above, assessment is a term that can have different meanings for different people or settings. Assessment may not be viewed the same in a preschool classroom as a third-grade classroom. Therefore, a common definition of assessment is needed for our study: **Assessment** is "a systematic means of collecting and documenting information about children's learning

and development" (Scott-Little & Reschke, 2022, unp.). It is a process of gathering evidence and inferring what children know, how they think, and what they can do (McTighe, 2018; National Task Force on Assessment Education for Teachers, n.d.). Note that this definition does not limit assessment to tests but can include any method that allows you to make accurate inferences about children. Assessment is also not limited to academic knowledge and skills, but it includes all developmental domains: physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional. Assessments can determine how children approach learning and if they can transfer what they know or understand to new situations (McTighe, 2018). Used appropriately, assessment can be a positive tool to support infants', toddlers', preschoolers' and elementary-aged children's learning and development.

An early childhood educator must be proficient in a variety of assessment methods to fully support children's growth and learning. This proficiency requires **assessment literacy**, or the knowledge and ability to determine the purpose of an assessment, choose the most appropriate assessment method for that purpose, and use the results in a way that satisfies that purpose. These decisions depend upon the quality of the evidence gathered and how it was collected. If assessments are of poor quality or those doing the assessments are unskilled and lack knowledge of how to interpret and use the results, poor decisions may be made that are harmful to children (Stiggins, 2018). Effective early childhood educators are assessment literate, understanding the assessment process and how to use it to support young children's growth and development (Evans, 2021; McTighe, 2018; National Task Force on Assessment Education for Teachers, n.d.). While you will learn much about assessment by reading this textbook, assessment literacy is most fully developed when you have a chance to apply the key concepts in real-life situations (Evans, 2021). This textbook will also offer many suggestions for how you might do that.

Connections 1.1

With a classmate or in an online discussion board, discuss these questions:

- What have been your experiences with assessments?
- Do you trust assessment results to be accurate?
- Do you believe tests can be fair?
- Do you worry that your results won't be consistent?
- Do you like results that show you how you ranked compared to others or how you did compared to certain criteria?
- What format do you like for tests?
- Does a time limit affect how well you do?
- Does the testing location affect your test results?

All these questions relate to topics that you will be learning about in this textbook.

Purposes of Assessment in Early Childhood Education

There are five major purposes or reasons for why you might use assessment practices with young children.

Plan for Instruction and Supportive Learning Environments

Assessment information about individuals and groups of children is essential for supporting children's development and making curricular decisions. Whether you use informal observations or more formal testing, you can use assessment information to determine what to teach, what experiences should be provided to your students to help them learn concepts or skills, and how to best create a supportive environment for this learning to occur (Milner, 2018). This information will help you individualize your instruction with "just right" activities to meet children's needs (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). These are the steps in this process:

1. Gather information about children's learning through a variety of methods, such as observations, tasks, or more formal methods.
2. Document or record the information.
3. Analyze and reflect upon the information; this may be done individually or with other teachers or family members.
4. Make decisions and plans based upon this analysis (Scott-Little & Reschke, 2022; Teaching Strategies, 2012).

Monitor Children's Progress Toward Developmental and Learning Goals

Young children grow and develop rapidly in their first eight years of life. Development is often progressive, with new skills or knowledge dependent upon those previously learned. Skillful early childhood educators are keen observers of this development, noting when children reach developmental milestones, understand a new concept, or learn a new skill. Teachers also observe children's interests, how they approach learning, or solve a problem. For example, after noticing that Ben was highly interested in dinosaurs, Allison encouraged him to create a picture book about dinosaurs, using books and other materials she provided. Ben had shown little interest in writing previously, but he eagerly began to work when the writing topic matched his interest.

Identify the Need for Early Intervention Services

Ongoing assessment can also reveal when children are not reaching expected developmental levels or are struggling with a concept or skill. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that about one in six children have some type of developmental disability, yet less than half of these delays are identified prior to children beginning kindergarten. Early intervention with needed services can positively impact children's development and learning. It is important to act quickly if there is any indication that a child has a potential developmental delay (CDC, n.d.). For example, Mirabelle's toddler teacher noticed that she was still using sounds instead of

words and often failed to follow simple directions, both developmental milestones for her age. After sharing her concerns and referral for a developmental screening with Mirabelle's family, a hearing test revealed a moderate hearing loss and the need for special services. Figure 1.1 is an example of a developmental checklist that families and teachers can use to determine if a child is meeting developmental milestones for each age level.

Evaluate Teaching Practices, Environmental Settings, and Programs

You may think that assessment is only done with children, but it is important for teachers and administrators to continually assess the effectiveness of their teaching practices, the settings in which learning is occurring, and the overall early childhood program. This can provide useful information that teachers can use to modify and improve their teaching and guidance strategies to meet children's needs. For example, one study found that principals' feedback to teachers, based upon six observations of their teaching throughout the school year, promoted their professional growth and improved their teaching effectiveness (White, 2019).

The setting in which children learn is often called the "third teacher" (with families being the first and classroom teachers the second) (Biermeier, 2015). It is therefore important to evaluate the room arrangement, equipment, and materials, displays, and other classroom factors to determine if they are best supporting children's learning and development. Programs that receive public or private funds are accountable that those dollars are being spent wisely and of benefit to the children enrolled. Program evaluation can help identify strengths and weaknesses, which can lead to continual improvement (Childcare Assistance Technical Network, 2025). For example, at the Learning Center, a preschool in rural California, the director and teachers reviewed children's assessment data three times a year. After noticing concerns with social and emotional assessment results, they decided to provide more open-ended play and learning activities and remove many of their product-based directed experiences. Once this was fully implemented, a formal program evaluation showed an improvement in the language interactions between teachers an children (Mangione et al., 2019).

Communicate Children's Development and Learning to Families and Other Professionals

An important part of assessment literacy is being able to effectively communicate children's assessment results to their families and other professionals who are involved in the children's care and education. This may be done through informal conversations, written communication, or formal conferences. This practice is especially crucial once children enter elementary school, as a Gallup poll found that more than six out of 10 K–12 parents say their child's teacher rarely or never discussed their child's assessment results with them (Goodrich, 2016). Chapter 13 provides more detailed information about how you can be an assessment partner with your students' families.

Figure 1.1 ▪ Developmental Checklist for a 3-Year-Old

Your child at 3 years

Child's Name **Child's Age** **Today's Date**

Milestones matter! How your child plays, learns, speaks, acts, and moves offers important clues about his or her development. Check the milestones your child has reached by age 3. Take this with you and talk with your child's doctor at every well-child visit about the milestones your child has reached and what to expect next.

What most children do by this age:

Social/Emotional Milestones

- ☐ Calms down within 10 minutes after you leave her, like at a childcare drop off
- ☐ Notices other children and joins them to play

Language/Communication Milestones

- ☐ Talks with you in conversation using at least two back-and-forth exchanges
- ☐ Asks "who," "what," "where," or "why" questions, like "Where is mommy/daddy?"
- ☐ Says what action is happening in a picture or book when asked, like "running," "eating," or "playing"
- ☐ Says first name, when asked
- ☐ Talks well enough for others to understand, most of the time

Cognitive Milestones (learning, thinking, problem-solving)

- ☐ Draws a circle, when you show him how
- ☐ Avoids touching hot objects, like a stove, when you warn her

Movement/Physical Development Milestones

- ☐ Strings items together, like large beads or macaroni
- ☐ Puts on some clothes by himself, like loose pants or a jacket
- ☐ Uses a fork

Other important things to share with the doctor...

1. What are some things you and your child do together? _____
2. What are some things your child likes to do? _____
3. Is there anything your child does or does not do that concerns you? _____
4. Has your child lost any skills he/she once had? _____
5. Does your child have any special healthcare needs or was he/she born prematurely? _____

_____

You know your child best. Don't wait. If your child is not meeting one or more milestones, has lost skills he or she once had, or you have other concerns, act early. Talk with your child's doctor, share your concerns, and ask about developmental screening. If you or the doctor are still concerned:

1. Ask for a referral to a specialist who can evaluate your child more; and
2. Call any local public elementary school for a free evaluation to find out if your child can get services to help.

For more on how to help your baby, visit **cdc.gov/Concerned**.

Don't wait.
Acting early can make a real difference!

Download CDC's free *Milestone Tracker* app

Developmental milestone content and artwork provided by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Learn the Signs. Act Early." program (www.cdc.gov/ActEarly; accessed [2023, June 6]).

Connections 1.2

With your classmates or in an online discussion board or group, brainstorm examples of each of these five purposes of assessment in early childhood education. Can you think of examples for each of these age levels: infants/toddlers (birth to 2 years old), preschoolers (3 to 5 years old), primary grades (5 to 8 years old)? While it may be easier to think of examples for older students, these purposes for assessment in early childhood apply to all ages in the birth through third-grade age range.

Essentials of Developmentally Appropriate Assessment

Assessment in early childhood is unique in that we gather information about children who may not yet be reading, writing, or even talking in sentences. They likely will not understand the value of assessment or be motivated to participate in an assessment activity that is not interesting to them. Therefore, it is vital that assessments be appropriate for their level of development. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020a) defines developmentally appropriate practices (including assessment) as those that are culturally, linguistically, and ability appropriate for each child. Developmentally appropriate assessment practices have these characteristics:

- Ongoing, strategic, purposeful, and authentic: Assessments are embedded in everyday class activities and may be planned or unplanned. They are also connected to children's lives, both at school and out of school (NAEYC, 2020a; Shepard et al., 2020).
  Lucia keeps checklists of her program's learning goals on clipboards near the different interest areas of her classroom. As the children play, she intentionally watches for evidence of new skills or knowledge that emerges in their play that she can note on their checklist.
- Valid, reliable, and trustworthy: Assessments have demonstrated that they measure what they are intended to assess and are not used for high-stakes decisions unless **validity** (accuracy), **reliability** (consistency), or trustworthiness of the assessment data has been established (NAEYC, 2020a).
  The kindergarten team of teachers created their own "kindergarten readiness" assessment with the skills they hoped children would possess when entering kindergarten, such as writing their name and recognizing colors. However, when reviewed by an educational consultant, the test was determined to measure skills unrelated to success in kindergarten and would likely be harmful to use when discussing school readiness with the children's families. The school district chose to instead use a developmental screening test that had evidence of providing valid and reliable data about children's development.
- Focus on progress toward developmentally appropriate goals: Assessments measure goals that are age and individually appropriate and reflect children's background knowledge and experiences. With older students, these goals can be shared, using age-appropriate language and examples, for them to use in self-evaluation and goal setting (NAEYC, 2020a; Shepard et al., 2020).

Shandra regularly directs her students' attention to the writing rubric on the wall in her classroom that lists the characteristics of "Our Very Best Second-Grade Writing." The children use the rubric when they do self- or peer editing of their "sloppy copies."

- Asset-based approach: Teachers conduct assessments that determine what children can do—their knowledge and experiences they have learned from their homes and communities—instead of using a deficit approach that focuses on what they do not know or are unable to do. Determining students' present level of functioning can help you determine the next steps with them (Ayres, 2022; NAEYC, 2019; Seitz, 2021; Shepard, et al., 2020).
  Jane received a new third-grade student from Venezuela who had conversational English skills, in addition to his native Spanish language. As a part of determining Gabriel's literacy skills, Jane sat by him while he read a book in Spanish, observing how he interacted with the text, including his expressions and excitement about the story. She asked him questions about whether he liked reading and if he read books at home. She also planned to talk to his family to learn more about his reading abilities in Spanish, as she knew he would likely need additional support in phonics with the English letters and sounds that were not in his Spanish language. Knowing his literacy skills in his native language helped her plan where to begin in teaching him to read in English (Gonzalez, 2021).

- Multiple assessment methods: There are different ways that children can demonstrate their skills and knowledge, and assessment tools should be just as varied. Using one assessment strategy will likely yield an incomplete picture of children's competencies (Milner, 2018; NAEYC, 2020a; Scott-Little & Reschke, 2022; Shepard et al., 2020).
  Mali used observation of her toddlers playing as the primary way of assessing their development. However, she found that different methods of recording her observations were helpful in giving her varied information for their portfolios. She wrote descriptions of their social and emotional behaviors, used a checklist for their physical skills, and recorded videos with analysis for their cognitive and language development. Her early childhood program also did formal testing annually with a standardized developmental screening test. Mali found that each assessment method gave her a piece of the puzzle about her developing toddlers.

- Multiple sources of relevant information: In addition to using a variety of assessment methods, inferences about children's knowledge and abilities should come from multiple assessment sources and settings. This reduces the risk of making errors in evaluating children's learning and development (McTighe, 2018; NAEYC, 2020a; Shepard et al., 2020).
  When preparing her first-quarter kindergarten report cards, Lachelle reviewed her students' physical skills checklists from the physical education teacher and the positive behavior notes she had received from the music and art teachers for her students. These additional sources of assessment information helped her complete the areas of physical, social, and emotional development on the report cards.

- Family input: Families provide assessment information and are consulted on any major decisions made based upon assessment results (NAEYC, 2020a).
  Alejandra met with 2-year old Liam's parents for his semiannual parent-teacher conference. She had concerns about his language development, noting that he was saying few words and was often frustrated when he could not communicate his needs. He scored low on the language section of the developmental screening assessment when he did not point to pictures of common

items or follow simple instructions. Alejandra asked his parents to describe how Liam used language at home, both in what he understood and what he said. His parents shared they had seen similar behaviors, and together they discussed the idea of scheduling an appointment with his pediatrician for hearing and language testing.

- Assessment system: a plan is in place for regular collection, analysis, and use of assessment data to improve children's learning and development, the teacher's instructional practices, and the early learning setting (NAEYC, 2020a; Shepard et al., 2020).
  The Lindgren Child Care Center at St. Cloud State University (Minnesota) has a public assessment plan that details how the program ensures regular developmental data are gathered and used by the teachers. Examples include:
  - *A developmental screening completed the first month of a child's enrollment.*
  - *Ongoing naturalistic observations of children's interactions and behaviors, documented with checklists, rating scales, and work samples.*
  - *Family input through online journals and twice-a-year conferences.*
  - *Environmental rating scales of classroom environments done periodically.*

  Lead teachers use this information for planning curriculum and to identify any potential delays. In partnership with children's families, they create goals for the children based upon this assessment information (Lindgren Child Care Center, 2022).

Connections 1.3

Each of the characteristics of developmentally appropriate assessment were accompanied by an example. Choose one of these characteristics and think about your own example that you've experienced or seen in a classroom. Share your example with your class or in an online discussion board.

Legal Rights in Assessment of Young Children

Because young children have little power in assessment practices that involve them, it is crucial that caregivers and educators are knowledgeable about children's legal rights, as well as ethical practices, regarding assessment. There are a myriad of federal and state laws relating to assessment, depending upon the setting and children served. Following is a summary of major federal legal rights when conducting assessments with young children:

Right to Privacy/Confidentiality

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law enacted in 1974 that applies to any public or private school and any agencies that receive federal funding from the U.S. Department of Education. This law protects students' privacy relating to their education records. Schools may not disclose any "personally identifiable information in education records" without the consent of the students' parent or legal guardian (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Parents or legal guardians also have the right to review any of their child's educational records and request corrections if information is inaccurate (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). While information may be shared with others who are involved in the child's

education, such as the school counselor, speech therapist, or teacher's assistant, teachers may not share any assessment data without family permission. This implies that teachers should not talk openly in a teacher's lounge or other public setting about children's assessment results. It is also not a good practice to allow volunteers to grade student work or have access to a gradebook with other assessment results. Volunteer training should include the requirement to keep any observations of children's actions in the classroom confidential.

Right to Fair and Equitable Assessment Practices

All children deserve assessments that are fair and unbiased, with equal opportunities to fully demonstrate what they know and can do. This is also a federal requirement in the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, the federal law that ensures a free appropriate public education with special education services for children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). This law states that assessments cannot discriminate against children based upon their race, culture, or language (Lee, 2022b). Discrimination occurs due to bias in the assessment or the person doing the assessment. **Bias**, or having negative (or positive) assumptions about a particular group over others, can cause a teacher to reach inaccurate conclusions about the child's knowledge or abilities (Learner-Centered Initiatives, 2016). To ensure equitable assessment practices, it is important that children are provided language support and multiple ways to explain or show their knowledge and skills (Shepard et al., 2020). This is especially true for children who do not speak English as their first language. For example, a test question that asks a third-grade multilingual learner to "draw a conclusion" about a reading passage can be confusing, as the student may think she is supposed to draw a picture, causing her to score low on the test (Colorin Colorado, 2019).

Right to Assessment in Native Language

Related to fair and equitable assessment practices, children who are not proficient in English have the right to assessments in their native language (Lee, 2022b). This can be challenging for early childhood programs or schools that do not have any employees who speak the child's language. NAEYC (2020a) recommends that a plan be in place for recruiting volunteers or paid translators to assist with the assessment process, training them in how to interact with young children and the importance of confidentiality with assessment results.

Parents' or Legal Guardians' Rights in the Special Education Process

Federal law clearly lays out the rights that a child's parents or legal guardians have relating to assessment for special education services. IDEA ensures (among other things) that procedural safeguards are in place for children when being assessed for special education services (Lee, 2022b; Wright & Wright, 2022). Parents or legal guardians have the right to

- request an assessment be done if there are concerns about the child's learning and development;
- **informed consent**, or to be fully informed with prior written notice of any major assessments given to a child, that is not being given to all children (Lee, 2022c);
- give written consent or refusal for a major assessment that is not being given to all children;

- timely assessments after a request is made (60 calendar days if state law does not have a different time frame);
- multiple assessments to get a full picture of the child's developmental and academic abilities;
- be a part of the assessment team and give input about the child's abilities;
- be fully informed and receive copies of all assessment results, at no cost;
- **due process** if there is a disagreement between the school and parents or legal guardians about decisions relating to the child's assessments, education, or special education service—due process provides a formal way to resolve these disputes (Lee, 2022a); and
- an **independent educational evaluation (IEE)**, or an assessment by an outside specialist (Lee, 2022b).

IDEA also requires that states have policies and procedures in place that ensure all children with disabilities in that state are "identified, located, and evaluated," known as the **Child Find** mandate (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). This requirement is for all children ages 0 to 21, regardless of whether they attend private or public school (PAVE, 2020).

Connections 1.4

How might you assess this kindergarten literacy standard in a way that meets legal requirements? What would you need to consider in your assessment practices?

1. Students will read common high-frequency words by sight (e.g., *the, of, to, you, she, my, is, are, do, does*).

Federal and State Assessment Requirements in Early Childhood

In addition to federal laws relating to the assessment rights of children and families, there are also required federal and state assessments for children enrolled in publicly funded early childhood programs and schools.

Head Start Assessment Requirements

Head Start is a federally funded early childhood program for both typically developing children and those with disabilities. Head Start programs serve children from birth to age 5 nationwide, with the focus on families whose incomes are at or below federal poverty guidelines. Children in the foster care system or who are experiencing homelessness are also eligible for Head Start programs, and a limited number of children who do not meet these criteria may also be enrolled (Office of Head Start / Administration for Children and Families, 2022).

The Head Start program describes the first important element of quality teaching and learning as screening and ongoing child assessment (Head Start / ECLKC, 2022). These assessment requirements include:

- A developmental screening of a child's "behavioral, motor, language, social, cognitive and emotional skills" within 45 calendar days of the child's enrollment, using a research-based screening instrument.
- Referral for a formal evaluation, if screening results warrant it.
- Ongoing standardized and structured assessments (observation-based or direct) aligned to the Head Start program goals.
- Valid and reliable, developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate assessments, conducted by qualified and trained personnel.
- Assessments conducted in a child's home language, if necessary, by a bilingual staff member, contractor, consultant, or interpreter. If none are available, information gathered from structured observations and information from the family.
- Prohibition of assessment data used to rank, compare, provide rewards or sanctions, or exclude children from enrollment (Head Start / ECLKC, 2021a, unp., Head Start / ECLKC, 2021b, pp. 31–33).

State Assessment Requirements

Individual states also have legislation relating to early childhood assessment. These requirements apply to preschool programs and elementary schools that receive state funding. Early learning care and education programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers nationwide have been described as a "patchwork," with wide variations among states as to offerings available for young children. About 35% of 4-year-olds and 7% of 3-year-olds attended a publicly funded preschool program in 2022 (Cooney, 2024). However, with 65–75% of both parents in the workforce, many children are in private care—either group programs, home care, or kinship care (First Five Years Fund, 2022). While private caregivers must meet state licensing requirements, there are typically not any specific requirements for assessment of children. Once children reach kindergarten age, state departments of education have legal oversight of public school programs, including assessment practices. The legal requirements relating to assessment vary from state to state, as well as among different age levels and programs, depending upon whether the program receives any state funding. Following is a description of typical state legal assessment requirements at the different age levels.

Birth – Age 5.

In 2022, seven states and the District of Columbia offered **universal preschool** (a pre-kindergarten program with no income or other eligibility requirement) for 4-year olds (Cooney, 2024). In addition, 44 states provided partial funding for public school PreK programs (Education Commission of the States, 2022). For programs that receive any taxpayer funding, accountability is required, in terms of child and program assessments. Assessment requirements for these publicly funded programs vary from state to state. For example, in Georgia, an observation-based assessment called Work Sampling System is used in all classrooms. Teachers observe children's learning and development through the year, using a checklist of 69 learning and development standards. The assessment data is uploaded in an online portfolio that is shared with families and is transferred at the end of the year, to be available to the children's future kindergarten teachers (Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, 2022). In Iowa, state law requires all school districts to assess enrolled 4-year-old children with the GOLD assessment instrument,

an authentic, observation-based assessment using notes, photos, videos, and digital samples to document children's learning (Iowa Department of Education, 2022; Teaching Strategies, 2022). California developed its own assessment, the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP), where teachers observe, document, and reflect on infant-toddler and preschool's learning and development, with the results used to plan curriculum and improve programs (California Department of Education, 2021). Several states have adopted the DRDP as their official assessment requirement.

There is less consistency in assessment requirements in private early childhood care and education programs. The Goddard School for Early Childhood Development, named one of the best early childhood franchise programs in 2024, with 598 programs nationwide, uses a naturalistic play-based observation, documentation, and portfolio approach to assess children. Teachers document children's learning as they are playing, noting their interests, skills, and behaviors (Goddard School, 2025; Norwood, 2023). Programs that adopt a commercial curriculum may use its accompanying assessment program. For example, programs that use the project-based Creative Curriculum may add the GOLD formative assessment that is aligned with the Creative Curriculum's lessons (Teaching Strategies, 2022). Programs may also choose to document children's development compared to developmental milestones, such as the CDC Milestones Checklist (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). These milestones are included in Appendix A. Some private programs may choose not to do any formal assessment of children's learning and development, as most state childcare licensing regulations focus on health and safety requirements, rather than curriculum and assessment.

Kindergarten – Third Grade.

Many school districts conduct formal testing of children entering kindergarten as a part of a kindergarten **screening assessment**. The purpose of this assessment is to identify children who may need further testing for health, developmental, or social-emotional concerns. A screening assessment does not diagnose problems but identifies children who need further testing to determine if they need support or special services (Minnesota Department of Health, 2022). Kindergarten screenings may include vision, hearing, dental, and developmental testing. States may require a specific **standardized assessment**, a test designed by experts that is administered, scored, and interpreted in a standard or consistent way (Lynch, 2016). States may also let individual school districts determine the screening tools used. For example, all New York state-funded programs require a screening of every new student entering a public school in grades PreK–12 but are not required to use the same test. Districts are required to establish procedures for screening that include (but are not limited to)

- evidence of health examination;
- certificate of immunization;
- vision, hearing, and dental screenings;
- cognitive development, motor development, and language and literacy skills; and
- a determination of the child's home language (New York State Education Department, 2022).

Once children enter K–12 school, assessment requirements for public schools are governed by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This law requires that states develop academic

standards and assessments aligned to those standards. States must conduct annual statewide assessments in reading/language arts and mathematics in grades 3–8, as well as annual English language proficiency assessments in grades K–12 for all English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). States may develop a standardized **achievement test** that assesses their state standards. Achievement tests are commercially developed tests designed to measure what students have learned in academic subjects. For example, the Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR) is required for students in public school grades 3 through 8 and tests students' knowledge of the Illinois Learning Standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2025). In Texas, all public school students in grades 3–12 take the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), which measures learning of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills state curriculum standards (Texas Education Agency, 2025).

Assessment requirements in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade will vary from state to state, and even among individual school districts. Some school districts choose to use a general standardized test that is not aligned to specific state standards in the early grades, while others may only assess their district curriculum standards with locally developed assessments. Regardless of the age level, if you choose to teach in a public school, you will likely be involved in administering required assessments. Chapter 7 will further discuss standardized assessments.

Connections 1.5

With a classmate or in an online discussion board, discuss the types of assessments that you think are appropriate to do with children at the preschool, kindergarten, and primary grades levels. What actions might you take if your state was considering implementing a required assessment that you did not think was developmentally appropriate for the age level being proposed?

Ethical Practices in the Assessment of Young Children

While it is important for you to be aware of legal assessment requirements, it is also crucial that you understand and use ethical practices when assessing young children. Ethical practices protect vulnerable populations from harm and provide the moral standards agreed upon by the profession. NAEYC created the Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment in 1989, with revisions in 2005 and 2011. A revised position statement on ethical practice in early childhood is expected to be released in 2025 (O'Neil, 2024). This Code includes **ethical ideals**, or aspirations, for early childhood educators and **ethical principles**, or rules of professional conduct, when working with young children, including assessment (Feeney et al., 2022). Ideally, early childhood caregivers and educators will choose assessment methods and instruments appropriate for young children and beneficial to them. They will use information from assessments to not only identify children who need special services, but also to support children's learning and development, and to plan instruction that fits their needs. They will share this information with children's families in a way families can understand their child's learning and development. Early childhood caregivers and educators will also advocate for the use of multiple assessments that are beneficial to children (NAEYC, 2011).

To implement these ideals, you will need to follow these ethical principles:

- Use a variety of assessment methods and instruments that will provide you with a comprehensive understanding of a child's development and learning.
- Fully inform families of the assessments you will be using with their child, the purpose of these assessments, and how you will use the information you learn from them.
- Know how to administer a variety of assessments and interpret the results accurately.
- Keep assessment information confidential and only share it with those who are involved in the child's care and education (NAEYC, 2011).

These ethical ideals and principles should be a goal for you in your work with young children. The following chapters in this textbook will help you reach this goal.

Connections 1.6

An ethical dilemma is a situation in which a person must decide the most morally or ethically appropriate course of action. Often, both sides of the issue seem "right," and more than one resolution can be justified—each with a benefit, but also some costs. Ethical dilemmas usually have no easy solution and require thought and discussion with others. The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment can provide guidance in resolving ethical dilemmas (Feeney & Freeman, 2016). With a classmate, small group, or online discussion, search for "NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment" and use the code to discuss how you might handle the following ethical dilemma:

> *One of your fellow third-grade teachers does not think that the state's achievement test is a valid assessment of what her students know and can do. In general, she thinks standardized testing is harmful to young children because of the stress that high-stakes testing puts upon them. She is especially concerned that her students who don't speak English as their first language will do poorly on the upcoming test because of the lack of translators being provided for them. She confides in you that she has gotten a copy of the test and has given some of the questions to the students as practice to help them score better. She has also done several lessons leading up to the test that directly teaches them how to answer specific questions. She defends her actions by saying the test is unfair to her students, and she is just trying to give them an equal chance to do well on it. You are troubled by this information as it seems that her students will now have an unfair advantage over yours, and it is ultimately teaching children to cheat on tests. You debate whether you should inform your administrator or counselor, knowing that it will create a rift in your relationship with this teacher and could possibly cause her to lose her job. What should you do?*

Summary

Before reading this chapter, you may have had questions such as "Why should we assess young children?" or "How do you assess children who can't read or write?" Hopefully, you now have a better understanding of what assessment in early childhood is and the purposes it serves. You have learned key characteristics of developmentally appropriate assessment practices and the legal rights and ethical practices that should be followed when assessing young children. There are also federal

and state requirements for assessment that early childhood educators need to be familiar with. While some of the assessment terminology—such as validity, reliability, screening, or standardized tests—may still be confusing, further chapters will go into more details about them. Your journey in assessment literacy is just beginning!

Applying Your Knowledge

Infant / Toddler Case Study

At Kassidy's Kids Early Learning Center, a portfolio approach was used in assessment. Teachers and assistants did regular observations of the children at play and made notes about the children's skills and abilities, which were compiled into a portfolio to share with families. Kassidy, the owner of the center, prided herself on providing training for her lead teachers on how to be keen observers of children in the natural setting of their classroom. She also provided all classrooms with posters of the expected developmental milestones for the children's age to watch for in their observations.

The toddler classroom was a busy place, and Tameka, the lead teacher, asked the assistant teacher, Heather, to do observations and note taking for the children's portfolios. Heather was new in her position and knew she was supposed to watch for examples of the developmental milestones on the classroom poster but had not had any further training on observational-based assessment. Following was one of her observations of two children playing:

> *In the block center, Xavier and Emma were each stacking blocks. Emma knocked over Xavier's blocks (I'm sure it was an accident), and Xavier pushed her away and began grabbing the blocks she was using. Xavier yelled, "Mine!" when poor Emma tried to take her blocks back. She began crying, and Xavier ignored her and started stacking blocks again. When he wouldn't share any of the blocks with her, she was sad. She left the block center, went to the housekeeping center, and began playing with a baby doll. Xavier looked pleased that he got his way with the blocks.*

Reflection Questions

1. What purpose(s) of assessment do the observation-based notes the teachers do at this center serve?
2. Do you note any essential characteristics of developmentally appropriate assessment in this toddler classroom?
3. Are any legal rights of the children being violated in this example? Do you note any biases on the part of the assistant teacher in how she records her observations? What clues in her notes are there to biases?
4. What examples of developmental milestones for toddlers could be noted from this observation? How could the note be improved to better illustrate the toddlers' social-emotional development?

Preschool Case Study

Hannah and her 4-year-old daughter, Rosie, signed in at the registration table at their local public school's annual preschool screening. Hannah was a stay-at-home mom to Rosie and her little sister, and she was anxious to see if Rosie was on track for being ready for kindergarten. Rosie was an

outgoing, talkative, and curious little girl, and Hannah thought she would do well. The first area in the school's gym they were sent to was the vision test, where Rosie was asked to cover one eye and tell the screener which way the "caterpillar's legs" were pointing. Rosie was initially interested, but soon was off track, telling the lady about the caterpillars she'd seen in her backyard garden. It took a while to complete the test, and Hannah worried about the line of children waiting for their turn, some who started to cry and asked to go home. They were next sent to the "gross motor" testing area. Hannah wasn't sure why it was called that but was relieved that Rosie was excited to do the jumping, skipping, and ball throwing tasks. They were next taken to a private area where Rosie was asked to answer questions about pictures and identify letters. Hannah was dismayed to see Rosie point to incorrect letters when she knew that Rosie knew the names of those letters. When the lady asked her to look at two pictures, one of a whole apple and one of an apple with a bite in it and to put them in order of what happened, Rosie put the apple with a bite first and the whole apple last. Hannah tried to get Rosie to correct it, but the lady stopped her and asked her not to help Rosie. As the questions continued, Rosie lost interest and wanted to go back and play with the ball. Even with coaxing, she stopped answering questions and just shrugged her shoulders as she looked around the room at the other activities. When they left that area, Hannah asked her why she put the apple pictures in the order she did, and Rosie said, "well, I took a bite out of that apple, and it was so so good, that I got another one to eat!" At the next area, Rosie was given blocks to play with and answer questions about how many blocks there were and their colors. Rosie chattered with the examiner, telling him about the building she was making and the people who lived in her town. He demonstrated how to make a bridge and asked her to make one with her blocks, but she instead built a "tall tall building" like the one she saw in New York City. At the end of the screening, the school's counselor explained the results to Hannah while Rosie had a snack. The counselor told Hannah that while Rosie did not score low enough for there to be any concerns or need for further testing, her scores on the language and concepts sections were below average, and it would be helpful if Hannah read books to Rosie and talked with her about the pictures and story. Hannah thought about all the books they had at home and their regular visits to the public library for more. She tried to explain to the counselor about how Rosie had gotten questions wrong that she knew, but the counselor was already looking past her to the next parent and child waiting for their exit conference. Hannah left, feeling defeated and wondering if Rosie really was below average in her language skills.

Reflection Questions

1. What purposes of assessment is this preschool screening serving?
2. What essential characteristics of developmentally appropriate assessment are present or missing in the preschool screening?
3. How valid and reliable do the results seem to be? What could be changed in how the preschool screening is done to make it have more valid and reliable results?
4. How can you be an advocate for developmentally appropriate assessment requirements for preschoolers in your state?

Primary Grades Case Study

A new child, Eun, moved into your kindergarten classroom in January. She lived in a bilingual home where her father spoke both English and Korean and her mother primarily spoke Korean and was learning English. Eun had lived most of her life in South Korea, where her father was

stationed at a military base there. She seemed shy and did not volunteer answers in class or ask any questions. You were not actually sure how much English she spoke or comprehended, and you wondered if her language skills might be delayed. She seemed to only talk to the other children at recess. However, she was very observant in class, well mannered, and helpful. You noticed her picking up trash in the cafeteria when other children ran outside to play. Eun was not at the same level as the other children in her literacy skills, such as being able to express her thoughts in her journal with recognizable letters and sounds, and you were concerned about her learning to read. Your school did not offer an English as Second Language (ESL) program, so you asked the speech and language pathologist for advice. She recommended giving Eun a standardized language screening test to determine if she had language delays. You consulted with the reading specialist who suggested that Eun attend the after-school tutoring program. She also wondered if Eun should spend another year in kindergarten to master English. When you asked the other teachers in the lounge at lunch what they would do, they advised not to do any testing, be patient, and give her more time to get acclimated to the new school. The fourth-grade teacher said she heard that Eun's mother was unhappy in her new home and wanted them to return to South Korea to be with her family, so there was no point in doing any assessments. You were not sure if any of these recommendations were the best for Eun.

Reflection Questions

1. Are any legal rights being upheld or violated in this case?
2. Are any ethical principles being followed or violated in this case?
3. Using the characteristics of developmentally appropriate assessments, what would be your next steps in assessing Eun to determine her literacy skills?
4. In the South Korean culture, educators are highly respected and parents value academic success. Why is it important for you to know this information and develop a further understanding of Eun's culture as a part of gathering assessment information about her?

Key Terms

achievement test
assessment
assessment literacy
bias
Child Find
due process
ethical ideals
ethical principles
Head Start
independent educational evaluation (IEE)
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
informed consent
reliability
screening assessment
standardized assessment
universal preschool
validity

Chapter Learning Objectives Assessments

CLO 1.1 & CLO 1.2 Create an infographic or pamphlet for the families of children in your classroom that describes why your early childhood program or school does assessment of their children. Be sure it includes a definition of the word "assessment" in family-friendly language.

CLO 1.3 Choose one of the essential characteristics of developmentally appropriate assessment practices and find examples of this characteristic for each of these age levels: infants/toddlers (birth – age 2), preschoolers (3- to 5-year-olds), and primary grades (kindergarten – third grade). These examples may be from your own observations and experiences or by surveying teachers of different age levels.

CLO 1.4 Create scenarios for each of the legal rights relating to assessment where these rights have been violated. With a classmate or in an online discussion board, trade scenarios and discuss what should have been done instead to respect children's and families' legal rights.

CLO 1.5 Research your state's required assessments for children, birth – third grade, in publicly funded programs. Prepare a report that summarizes each of the assessments.

CLO 1.6 Similar to CLO 1.4, create scenarios for each of the ethical ideals and principles where ethical practice is not being used. With a partner or in an online discussion board, trade scenarios and discuss what should have been done to use ethical practices when assessing young children.

Chapter 2

Observation and Documentation: The Foundation of Assessment of Young Children

Source: iStock.com/SDI Productions.

Chapter Learning Objectives (CLO 2)

2.1 Describe the importance of determining who, what, where, when, and why you conduct observations of students as an assessment method.

2.2 Describe the considerations when planning, documenting, and reflecting upon your observations, as well as the legal and ethical practices of observing young children.

2.3 Tell the common errors that can occur when doing observations, with suggestions for how to avoid those errors.

2.4 Explain when observation might be helpful in assessing groups of students as compared to individual students.

2.5 Tell how observational-based assessments can be used to evaluate the learning environment.

2.6 Explain the role of assessment in the instructional cycle.

This chapter's content is aligned with the:

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)'s Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators (2020):

Standard 3a – Early childhood educators understand that the primary purpose of assessment is to inform instruction and planning in early learning settings.

Standard 3b – Early childhood educators know how to use observation, documentation, and other appropriate assessment approaches and tools.

Division for Early Childhood of the Council of Exceptional Children (DEC/CEC), Early Interventionist / Early Childhood Special Educator (EI/ECSE) Standards (2020):

Standard 4.1 – Candidates understand the purposes of formal and informal assessment, including ethical and legal considerations, and use this information to choose developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate, valid, reliable tools and methods that are responsive to the characteristics of the young child, family, and program.

Introduction

Anna put 13-month-old Ava in a highchair for a morning snack of dry cereal and juice. As she watched, Ava picked up one of the round pieces of cereal using her thumb and pointer finger and put it in her mouth. This was the first time that Anna had noticed Ava using a "pincer grasp" to pick up an object, as in the past Ava swiped up objects with her whole hand. She pulled out Ava's developmental checklist and noted this new fine motor skill on her chart.

Will's favorite interest area in his preschool classroom was the iPad center. The iPads were loaded with open-ended creativity apps, and Will loved to create and narrate cartoon stories about pirates and superheroes. When observing his play, his teacher noticed that when he was not at the iPad center, he played by himself and had few social interactions with the other children. Based upon her observations, she set up iPad play time for Will with Luke, one of his classmates, and asked them to create a story together. After several weeks, she observed that in addition to the iPad center, Will now played with Luke in other areas of the classroom, and his social interactions had dramatically increased during his play time (adapted from CECE Early Childhood Videos at Eastern CT State University, 2013).

At Camila's kindergarten family conferences, Leila's mother expressed worry about Leila's behavior in class. In particular, she asked whether Leila followed class rules and the teachers' directions because since school had begun, she was more defiant at home, ignoring requests to clean up her toys or get ready for bed. While Camila hadn't noticed anything unusual with Leila's

behavior as compared to the other children in her class, she assured her mother that she would observe her behaviors more closely the next few weeks and report back to her. Camila decided to keep a tally of any time Leila didn't follow directions or the class rules and noted the time it occurred. Her observations confirmed that Leila's behavior was typical for kindergarteners, although she did tend to ignore directions at the end of the day when she was tired. Camila shared this information with her mother, and they discussed some possible strategies for defiant behavior at home, including starting a bedtime ritual earlier at night.

Observation can be one of the most direct, simple, and effective methods for understanding children's learning and development, yet also one of the most challenging parts of an early childhood teacher's job (Azilo Training, 2019; Petitpas & Buchanan, 2022; Spreeuwenberg, 2022). Observations are often planned, but they may also spontaneously occur when a child demonstrates a new skill, knowledge, or behavior. Because observation skills are key to being a successful early childhood educator and caregiver, this chapter will focus on the process of observation as an assessment method.

Observation + Documentation = Assessment

Observation, or the process of watching with intention—while documenting and analyzing children's learning and behaviors—is the foundation for early childhood assessment practices. Recording these observations can be one way that you will gain insight into what they do and know, why they do it, and how their learning and development changes over time. The more that you know about a child, the better you will be able to provide experiences that meet their needs and support their learning. The documentation from your observations will help drive your teaching, curriculum, and classroom routines so you can understand, support, and enhance your students' growth (Louis, 2020). Knowing children's interests and how they approach learning a new skill can be key in teaching them effectively (WETA, 2022).

While observation may seem like a simple skill, it is important to note that "watching" and "observing" for assessment purposes are not the same thing. One key difference is that observations *must* be recorded to be considered an assessment. It is not enough to observe children's actions. These observations must be documented in some way. Because our memories are often not accurate and detailed, observations need to be recorded right when they occur. If you wait until the end of the day to document your observations, you are likely to leave out important details or include information that didn't occur, making your assessment information inaccurate. The more observations are documented in a timely way, the more likely you will have in-depth and accurate information about a child's learning and development. These records can also help you see patterns in children's behaviors or learning (Azilo Training, 2019; Green, n.d.). There are multiple ways to document observations, and Chapter 3 will go into more detail about those methods.

Who, What, Where, When, and Why of Observations

Another key difference between watching and observing children as an assessment method is that observations have a purpose. You can prepare for an observation by intentionally asking yourself "Why am I observing this child or children?" The answers are many. Some of the reasons may be to

- help you understand a child's challenging behaviors,
- provide documentation of a particular skill that you are unsure a child has,
- learn more about how a child approaches learning a new concept,
- learn what interests a child has,
- document children's social interactions with their peers,
- record how children use language to express their ideas or get their needs met,
- observe how children respond to a new teaching strategy,
- provide documentation for a portfolio or a report card that you can communicate to children's families, and
- observe a particular area of your classroom to see how effective the environment is in supporting children's learning.

Once you have determined the *why* or your purpose for an observation, you must decide the *who* you will observe. Focusing on an individual child or small groups of children will likely yield your most valid assessment information, as it is difficult to do detailed and accurate observations of an entire class or large group of children. *What* you are observing can help you decide who you should be observing. In general, you will be assessing your students' mastery of your program or school's developmental or curriculum standards. For example, if your purpose of an observation is to check your preschool students' counting skills, you might set up board games for two or three children to roll dice and move a marker. As you observe them playing the game, you note who counts the squares correctly and who does not have **one-to-one correspondence** or the understanding that numbers correspond to specific quantities (Sapoznick & Brownell, 2019). If you have further questions about a child's counting abilities, you might set up an individual counting activity, such as a classroom play store where you observe a child counting individual coins to purchase items at the store. Natural and authentic opportunities where you can observe children count real objects is likely to yield more valid and reliable data than a worksheet of counting pictures, done as a group.

Where and *when* you observe children is an important decision to make, as it will help you be intentional in your observations. The most useful observations are likely to occur as children engage in their familiar, natural activities. When children play, you can gain meaningful information about their abilities and knowledge. Children tend to choose play activities where they feel safe and have confidence, which will allow you to see their strengths. This is especially true of **multilingual learners (MLLs)**, or children who are learning multiple languages and may not speak English as their first language. For example, one kindergarten teacher described the concern she had about a MLL student who could not retell familiar stories orally. However, when she observed him playing at the block center, an area that he felt comfortable with his limited English skills, he built three block structures. He then proceeded to retell *The Three Little Pigs* with simple key phrases from the story. She realized that her goal for him was not to be able to sequence the events that happened in a story, but rather to have the English vocabulary needed to retell a story. Intentionally observing this student while he played kept her from making an error in assessment of his literacy skills (Blessing, 2019).

While most observations are likely to take place in your classroom, remember that children can demonstrate their learning anywhere. If you are prepared to document your observations, you may catch key skills demonstrated outside during play time; during lunch time conversations; in

an art, physical education, or music classroom; or the library. For example, natural counting opportunities happen when you ask children at recess to count how many times a ball bounces or how many stairs there are going into their school. Assessment through observation is an ongoing, daily process, but there may be times that you set up a specific observation-based assessment. For instance, while children are in the block center, you might suggest: "Let's see who can build a tower with the most blocks. How can we figure out who did that?" You may also ask children questions like, "Can you tell me how you did that?" or "What are other ways we can show that?" to clarify their thought processes and better understand their thinking. Asking questions like "How did you come up with that idea?" helps you assess the process of learning, not just the final product (Blessing, 2019).

Connections 2.1

With a partner or in an online discussion board, discuss how you might assess each of these skills through observation and documentation:

- Language Developmental Milestone, 18 Months: Saying three or more words, besides "mama" or "dada" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022)
- Cognitive Developmental Milestone, 4 Years: Tells what comes next in a well-known story (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022)
- Second Grade Measurement and Data Standard: Measure the length of an object by selecting and using appropriate tools such as rulers, yardsticks, meter sticks, and measuring tapes (Common Core State Standards, 2022)

Use these questions to guide your discussion:

- Why are you doing this observation?
- How might you assess this skill through intentional observation(s) and documentation?
- Who will you observe? Will your observations be done individually, in small groups, or as a whole group?
- Where and when will you do your observations?

Developing Close Observation Skills

As noted above, watching and observing are not necessarily the same thing. While anyone can watch a child at play or work, this tends to be superficial and unfocused, with little attention to detail. It is easy for teachers to watch children doing routine activities without observing the skills they are demonstrating, because there is no deliberate concentration. Observation, on the other hand, is focused and purposeful, requiring a teacher's mind and energy. It takes practice and skill to have close observation skills.

Planning for Observations

Before beginning an observation, it can be helpful to write down questions about what you are looking for. Some examples might be:

- How does the child approach the materials or activities? Is he slow in getting started or does he jump right in? Does he use them in the usual way or different ways?
- How interested is the child in what she is doing? Does she stay engaged for a long period of time with the activity or does she move from one activity to another quickly?
- What are the child's movements like? Are they smooth, relaxed, and coordinated or does he seem tense and unable to coordinate his movements for the requirements of the activity?
- How does the child communicate during the activity? Does she use gestures, words, or sentences? Is she able to get her needs met or express her thoughts during the activity? What does she talk about?
- What emotions does the child express or display? Does he seem happy or frustrated to do the activity? What are some cues that his body language gives for you to be able to determine his feelings about it?
- Does the child engage with other children while doing the activity? Does she seem to get along well with other children, sharing materials if necessary? Does she play alone, with only a few children, or with all the children? Does she take any leadership in the activity or follow the lead of others?
- Does the child solve any problems that occur during the activity? Does he give up if he can't solve the problem easily or does he keep persevering—creatively trying different solutions? Does he ask questions when he is puzzled by the activity? (Petitpas & Buchanan, 2022; WETA, 2022)

Having questions like these in mind can bring focus to your observations.

It can also be helpful to plan for observations by considering when you and other staff will be available to make observations. Planning activities that do not require full participation by the adults in the room can allow more observation opportunities. It can also be helpful to assign specific children to each observer so they can concentrate only on those children (California Department of Education, 2006).

During an Observation

Once you have established why you are observing a child or children, it is important that you do not allow yourself to be distracted (as much as possible in an early childhood classroom). Give your full attention to your observation time and try not to let your thoughts wander. Be unobtrusive in recording your observations and do not interact with the child more than usual or create artificial situations. Your most valid observations are those that occur during normal and natural learning experiences. When documenting your observations, use key descriptive words. Avoid words that have value judgments, such as "cute," "sweet," or "bad." Be objective and do not try to form any opinions about the child's actions at this point. One way to do this is to only write

down what you see and hear (California Department of Education, 2006; Children's Museum Team, 2020; WETA, 2022).

Special consideration should be taken when observing children who are MLLs. Any attempt to communicate, such as gestures or eye contact, should be noted. Where possible, observations should be done by staff members who speak the child's language. If that is not possible, your program or school should try to recruit interpreters from the community who can provide translation services (California Department of Education, 2006).

Connections 2.2

With a small group, practice recording details describing an object. Each group member should choose an object from a backpack, purse, or pocket without showing the other group members what it is. Write a description of the object without using the name of the object in the description. Once everyone is done, put the objects in the center of the table and have one group member read each description to see if everyone can guess which object it is. What details were missing that would've helped identify the object? What words could've been used in the description to make it clearer?

If you are in an online class, post a description of your object in a discussion board without identifying the object. Choose three of your classmates' written descriptions of an object and post your guesses of what they are. As a class, post your thoughts about the difficulties in writing a clear description of an object, as well as the challenge of determining what the object was from a written description (adapted from California Department of Education, 2006).

There are multiple ways you can document your observations, but it is important to have the materials to record pertinent details in an easy and accessible place. For example, you may want to keep a small notepad and pen in the pocket of an apron if you are working with infants and toddlers. Another option is to keep sticky note pads around the room where you can jot observations and then organize them in a meaningful way at the end of the day. Having clipboards with lined paper hung around the room can also be handy for spontaneous observations that may be needed when children display new learning or skills. Using a smartphone or tablet to take photographs or short videos is also an option for documenting observations but you may need written notes to explain what the photos or videos are demonstrating. For example, a photo of a preschooler's block structure with a note pointing out the simple color pattern used can be effective documentation for this math skill. Using videos to document your observations allows you to teach while doing an assessment and can give you the opportunity to rewind and note skills you may have missed in an initial observation (Vera & Trejo, 2016). However, it is important to only take photos or videos that reflect significant information about a child. Quality over quantity is important, as it can be overwhelming to review files of photos and videos (LeeKeenan & Ponte, 2018). For older children, you may find it efficient to have a file folder for each child, with forms for recording your observations. The key is to find the most appropriate tool for the knowledge or skill you are observing. A phone or tablet video camera would be the most efficient way to observe a child's storytelling skills, while a checklist may be the best way to document the alphabet letters that a child can recognize (California Department of Education, 2006; Child Care Technical Assistance Network, 2018). Figure 2.1 is an example of a documentation form—commonly called an anecdotal record—completed about a child who struggled with impulse control and aggressive behaviors toward other children.

Figure 2.1 ▪ Sample Documentation Form for Observations

Child's Name: Garrett	Date: 3/23	Setting: Kdg. classroom
Observer: Talia, Paraprofessional	Developmental Domain / Skill Observed: Social-Emotional Development	
When Ms. Z called the class to the carpet, Garrett and Maddie sat on the same square. Garrett said, "You're on my place." Maddie responded, "No, I'm not. This is my square." Ms. Z told Garrett to move to another square. He moved to another square but sat with his back to Ms. Z. His face turned red, he crossed his arms on his chest, and put his chin down. When Ms. Z began talking, he turned around, but kept his arms crossed and chin down. Ms. Z asked the class what word started with W. Antonia called out, "Watermelon!" Garrett raised his hand, and Ms. Z called on him. He said, "Watermelon." Ms. Z said, "That's right. Thank you for raising your hand!" Garrett smiled, lowered his arms to his side, and his body relaxed.		

Notes: Garrett is showing much improvement in controlling his emotions when he has conflicts with other children. He responds well to positive attention from Ms. Z.

Reflecting Upon Observations

It can be easy to jump to conclusions when doing observations, based upon past experiences or biases about a child. Therefore, it is important to reflect on your observation data afterward. Comparing your observation documentation with previous observations can be helpful in noting developmental and learning progress. It can also help you find patterns in behaviors. If you note that a particular behavior is occurring repeatedly, it can be useful to analyze why that behavior is occurring. For example, this teacher was able to note a pattern to the fighting occurring in his classroom when he reflected upon several days of documentation:

> *A few years ago, the children in my classroom were getting into too many fights. I didn't know why, so I started writing the incidents down. At the end of three days, I looked at my notes and saw "9:20, fight over Legos; 9:50, fight over Legos; 10:00, fight over Legos . . ." I didn't have a problem with fights in my classroom; I had a problem with fights at the Lego table! Once I saw the pattern, I could make a change to improve things. I brought in twice as many Legos and put them at a bigger table. Ninety percent of the fighting stopped right there!* (Green, n.d.)

Determining patterns of undesired behaviors can help you plan how to stop them.

Your observation data will have little value to you without reflecting upon what it means for the children's learning and development and then using that information to guide your teaching. Your documentation of observations provides important evidence that may not be readily apparent when completing them. For example, it can be difficult to assess children's mathematical thinking while in the process of teaching. One teacher observed and photographed her kindergarten students as they organized math manipulatives in a counting activity. She later analyzed the photos to get an understanding of how they grouped and counted the concrete objects. The photographs also allowed her to collaborate with a colleague to plan instructional next steps for her students (Roller et al., 2019).

Setting aside time to review multiple observational data and discuss the information with your colleagues can provide significant new perspectives on the children. This reflection requires time and careful thought, but it is crucial when planning learning goals and activities for your class. These questions may be helpful as you reflect upon your observations:

- What have I learned about the child(ren) that I didn't notice before?

- Have I used a variety of observation methods or settings to gather information about the child(ren)?
- What more do I need to find out about the child(ren)?
- What areas of development or learning need to be better supported?
- What should be my next steps with the child(ren)? How can I extend and enrich learning for the child(ren) (California Department of Education, 2006; Clark, 2014).

Connections 2.3

Watch this short video clip of Elijah playing with toy bins from the Administration for Children and Families, titled "Looking at Elijah" (2018). Now watch the video clip again, but do a focused observation of Elijah, documenting your observations with the form in Figure 2.1. Did you notice details that you missed the first viewing when you were not taking notes? What did you learn from your observation notes about Elijah's developmental skills? Compare your observation notes with a classmate and discuss what you might do next to support Elijah's development.

Legal and Ethical Observation Practices

It is important to note that observations of children should be made by those who are directly involved in the child's education. Chapter 1 introduced you to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which protects students' privacy regarding assessment records. Observations that are done with all children as a part of an assessment plan do not require special permission from their families. However, it would be a violation of the families' and children's privacy to allow anyone not involved in a child's education to conduct an observation-based assessment or view observation documentation without the families' permission. Care should also be taken to keep observation information confidential and treated like any other assessment data. This is true for photographs and videos taken as a part of an assessment. Note: One exception to this is in the case of suspected child abuse and neglect where teachers are **mandated reporters** (legally required to report any suspicion of child abuse or neglect). Teachers must share any pertinent observational documentation with Child Protective Services (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Ethically, teachers must consider whether observational-based assessments will be harmful in any way to children. Chapter 1 introduced you to the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment; the most important ethical principle is P-1.1: *Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children* (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2011, p. 3). It is important that your observations do not interfere with children's natural play or learning activities. For example, the sight of their teacher watching and taking notes or taking their photograph may cause children to act differently or be nervous about completing their learning activities. You should be aware of children's body language, temperament, and communication style when doing observations and end the observation if a child appears uncomfortable or stressed. Regularly conducting observation-based assessments and explaining to the children what you are doing can minimize their apprehension

by making it a familiar activity. It is also ethical practice to ask children for permission before taking their photo or recording video of them. Seeking children's approval shows respect for their rights as a person (Mehan & Moore, 2011; Peterson & Elam, 2021).

Errors in Observation

Your observation-based assessment information is only as trustworthy as your skills as an observer. It is quite easy to make errors in recording observations that can lead to inaccurate or false assessment data about a child. It is important to be aware of these errors and do your best to prevent them from occurring (or be aware when an error has happened and discard that information). The following are some typical errors that occur when recording observations.

Teacher Bias, Cultural Expectations, and Stereotypes

Objectivity, or the "ability to see and describe something or someone without any preconceived ideas or prejudices" (California Department of Education, 2006, p. 17) is one of the most difficult skills to learn when observing children. We all tend to record the things that we expect to see, even if they did not occur (WETA, 2022). For example, if Max is typically aggressive with other children, his teacher may subconsciously expect him to be aggressive in her observation and record biased or inaccurate information. Conversely, if Max is typically kind and helpful, his teacher may subconsciously record positive actions that did not occur.

It is important that you stay objective when recording your observations. Here are some tips for how to do this:

- Use clear, descriptive words that clearly describe what you saw and heard.
- Recognize that you have biases and work to identify and remove them.
- Do not record information that you cannot observe, such as children's emotions or thoughts. Instead describe their actions, body language, and facial expressions that give clues to their feelings.
- Do not record your perceptions, interpretations, or judgment about the observation, but save those for later when you are reflecting.
- Seek to have multiple observations in different contexts and situations to get a more complete picture of the child's skills, knowledge, and development.
- Review your notes about a child, watching for a pattern of subjective comments or bias.
- Have a colleague review your observation documentation to uncover any subjective information that might be present (Azilo Training, 2019; Bates, Schenck, & Hoover, 2019; California Department of Education, 2006; Head Start / ECLKC, 2021).

Connections 2.4

Compare these two descriptions of children's behavior (Table 2.1). What words reflect the teacher's bias? What expectations do you think the teacher had for the children's behavior prior to this observation?

Table 2.1 ▪ Two Descriptions of Children's Behavior

Scenario 1	Scenario 2
Andres and Kelvin are playing in the sandbox with a bucket, two shovels, and a dump truck. Kelvin is playing happily, using a shovel to fill the dump truck with sand. Andres is angry that he doesn't have a truck to play with and obviously wants it. As usual, he doesn't wait for his turn, and he grabs the truck out of Kelvin's hands. He pushes Kelvin hard when he tries to take it back. The teacher assistant steps in and takes the truck away. She tells Andres: "If you can't play nicely with the toys, you can't have it. Go find something else to play with." Andres throws a fit, yelling that it was his truck, and the teacher assistant takes him inside to cool down. Kelvin continues to play in the sandbox, filling the bucket with sand.	Andres and Kelvin are playing in the sandbox with a bucket, two shovels, and a dump truck. Kelvin is using a shovel to fill the dump truck with sand. Andres said, "Can I have the truck?" Kelvin does not answer and continues filling the dump truck with sand. Andres reaches over and takes the truck out of Kelvin's hands. Kelvin stretches his arms to try and reach the truck, and Andres puts his hand on Kelvin's shoulder and pushes him back. The teacher assistant steps in and takes the truck away. She tells Andres: "If you can't play nicely with the toys, you can't have it. Go find something else to play with." Andres begins crying and said, "It was my turn." The teacher assistant takes his hand and leads him inside. Kelvin continues to play in the sandbox, filling the bucket with sand.

Missing Information/Managing Distractions

In addition to observer bias, another common error is to leave out crucial details. Missing information often occurs when the observer is distracted. Criminal eyewitness experts have found it is common to have conflicting reports from witnesses because of distractions that cause witnesses to focus on one detail, while missing others (Kindy, 2014). The early childhood classroom is full of constant distractions, and it can be easy for an observer to be momentarily distracted and miss key information in an observation. Some suggestions for managing distractions when doing an observation-based assessment are:

- Be organized with all materials needed for observation before beginning.
- If possible, do a **non-participant observation** where you do not participate in the activity you are observing. **Participant observation**, or doing an observation while you are leading or taking part in the activity, may allow you to be close to the child(ren) you are observing, but it is likely to cause you to miss important details (Azilo Training, 2019).
- Have someone else, such as a teaching assistant or colleague, lead or supervise the activity so you can give your full attention to the child or group you are observing.
- Sit away from possible distractions and near the child(ren) you are observing.

- Keep observation time brief, as distractions are likely to occur the longer you spend observing.

As noted earlier, missing information is also likely to occur if too much time passes before observations are recorded. While it can be difficult to write the details of an observation immediately after it occurs, the longer you wait to record your observation, the more likely you are to leave out important information.

Adding Information/Preconceived Expectations

Similar to leaving out information, a common error in observation is to add information that did not occur. This may happen because the observer expected the behavior to occur. For example, if a teacher had past negative experiences with a child's older sibling, she might expect the child to exhibit similar behaviors and unconsciously record something that did not occur. Criminal eyewitness experts found this to be common. Gary L. Wells, a psychology professor and expert on eyewitness memory, explained the phenomenon:

> *Our brains tend to record "in snippets" and then fill in blanks later—and often with false information. . . . The brain doesn't like empty spaces. We deduce things that may have happened. Sometimes it is just outright guesses that are made. Those deductions and guesses then become part of our memory.* (Kindy, 2014, n.p.)

One way to avoid this error is to consciously think about what you expect to see before the observation and be on guard about recording that expectation unless it occurred. Another strategy to avoid both adding or leaving out important information is to record audio or video of the children's activities and use that recording to write down your observation, playing it more than once to assure your information is accurate. Finally, the more regular observations you make, the more likely your assessment of a child is accurate, even if an error is made. There is no magical number of observations that should be done, but only doing an observation occasionally is more likely to lead to errors in data collection (Clark, 2014).

Connection 2.5

When examining children's work samples, it can be easy to make errors in your analysis of them if you did not observe the children doing the work. For example, children demonstrate certain skills and knowledge when they are writing that you would not be able to determine by just looking at the writing sample.

Discuss these scenarios with a classmate or in an online discussion board:

a. While you were working with a small group of kindergarten children during your literacy time, the other students were writing in their journals at their table. Maggie wrote this in her journal:

IETEMM

She brought it to you and said, "That's my name."

You did not observe Maggie write this. What skills can you determine that she has from looking at the writing sample? What skills do you not know whether she has from looking at this writing sample?

b. While you were working with a small group of kindergarten children during your literacy time, you observed Maggie write this:

IETEMM

She held her pencil in a correct grasp and began writing on the left side of the paper. She did not look around the room for any help. She wrote the first four letters, paused a moment, and then said to herself "M-m-maggie, Mmm, Mmm." She then wrote the last two letters. As she wrote them, she said "Up down up down." After she wrote it, she pointed to it and said, "That's my name."

What skills can you determine that she has from observing her write this? What is the advantage of observing Maggie's writing, as opposed to only having the work sample after she wrote it?

Documenting Individual Children Versus Groups

As a rule, observations should only be done of individual children or a small group of no larger than four students. This allows you to understand children in a deeper way because you have observed their

- strengths,
- needs,
- interests,
- abilities,
- approaches to learning,
- behaviors, and
- developmental and academic progress.

It is difficult to determine individual children's knowledge, skills, or behaviors when observing them as a part of a group. While it is likely that you would be able to gather information about a few outgoing students, there will be some children in the group that go unobserved.

Documenting Group Behaviors

There may be times that you want to learn more about how your class is functioning as a group, in terms of behaviors during learning activities. For example, you may want to determine if there is any relationship between children not following the classroom rules and your daily schedule. You might use an observation method called **time sampling** or **interval recording**, where you observe and tally children's behaviors at a specified time interval, such as every 15 minutes. The tallies can help you determine if there are times during the day when students are more likely to follow or not follow class rules. You may find that there are a higher number of rules infractions

at the end of the day than any other time during the day, and a revision of your class schedule is needed for this time.

You may also want to document the group's social interactions to determine if any children are being excluded from the group. You might use a **sociogram**, a method of charting the social groups that children play in (Brodie, 2023). In this observation method, you create a chart of who children play with during their unstructured class time, noting which children initiate play with others and which children primarily play alone. With older children, you can ask them to confidentially list the children they like to play with or work with on projects, in addition to observations, and create a visual representation of their preferences (Cooper, 2012; Parenta, 2018).

While these two examples of group documentation may be useful to a teacher, it is important to remember that they are not likely to give detailed evidence about an individual child. They can, however, provide information that can lead to further focused observations of a child to learn more about his behavior in the group.

Documenting Students' Collective Interests

Ample research has shown that when learning experiences are planned based upon children's interests, the children are more likely to find it meaningful, pay attention, interact with others, and be interested in their learning. One literature review compared 41 studies of more than 4,000 children and found that when teachers planned everyday learning activities based upon their interests, children had better communication and language outcomes (Eastern Connecticut State University, 2017; Head Start / ECLKC, 2022b; Lowry, 2016). Group observations can help determine the students' collective interests. For example, one preschool teacher observed that children at the block center were creating a stage, using blocks as microphones to sing songs, with some children serving as the audience. The teacher used this interest in music to develop a long-term class project, The Purple Room Band, where the children researched bands, musical instruments, and songs, and created invitations to a center-wide concert (Eastern Connecticut State University, 2017).

Group observations of children's interests require close observation and documentation. Some commercial curriculums include this in their planning materials. For example, the Creative Curriculum program has prompts for teachers to consider when planning, such as "What experiences interest the children now? Which materials are the children using most?" The High Scope curriculum focuses on children's interests, with children making choices daily of materials and activities that are interesting to them (Head Start /ECLKC, 2022b). To be able to answer these questions about children's interests, you can keep a tally or frequency count of which activities and materials children use or the topics that children talk about. You can also photograph their artwork, video record their conversations, or collect work samples, such as journal writings, to get an understanding of what children in your class are interested in.

Connections 2.6

Analyze the four journal entries by a kindergarten student in Figures 2.2 through 2.5 to determine what she's interested in. How would you use this information when planning your instruction for her?

Figure 2.2 ▪ Journal Entry #1

K. Shelton, personal communication, May 30, 2024.

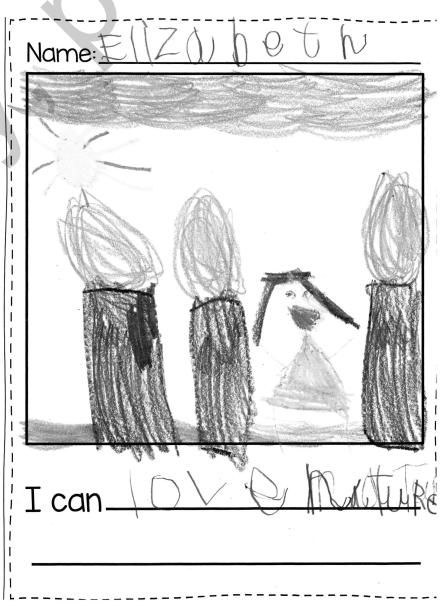
Figure 2.3 ▪ Journal Entry #2

K. Shelton, personal communication, May 30, 2024.

Figure 2.4 ▪ Journal Entry #3

K. Shelton, personal communication, May 30, 2024.

Figure 2.5 ▪ Journal Entry #4



K. Shelton, personal communication, May 30, 2024.

Documenting Students' Group Engagement in Learning

Engagement, or being fully interested and immersed in a task, activity, or concept, is essential for learning (Aa to Zz, 2022). This sustained attention might be during a teacher-led activity, such as story time, or during child choice activities. Observation is one way to assess and document the level of engagement your students have in the tasks you have planned. You first must define what engagement looks like when you observe the children. For example, eye contact, body language, and facial expressions might give a clue that a child is interested in a story you are reading. Engagement might be seen at a block center when children work together for a sustained length of time to build a large structure. However, engagement is not always clearly seen. For example, a child who is staring off in space rather than completing a writing task might seem off task when, instead, he is thinking deeply about what to write.

Documenting group engagement is difficult to do if you are participating or leading the activity. It requires you observe every student in the group. This is challenging if you are not able to focus all your attention on the children. One way to document group engagement as a participant observer is a time sampling, described earlier. Using this method, you would keep tallies of the number of students who appear engaged in learning activities at set intervals, such as every five minutes. This requires skill in being able to pause and record your tallies while you are working with the children. Another option is to video record your students and record the tallies later when you review the video. If you have assistance in your classroom, other ways to measure engagement include one of the adults being an unobtrusive observer, using a timer to track how long children focus their attention on certain materials or an activity. Observing your students' engagement can give you valuable clues for planning your instruction.

Evaluating Learning Environments

As noted in Chapter 1, the early childhood classroom is seen as the "third teacher" after children's families and teacher (Biermeier, 2015). To ensure the environment is a quality learning environment for children, it is important to regularly assess the materials, room arrangement, furniture, social interactions, outdoor play area, and other aspects of an early childhood program. The **Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS)**, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, is a "systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs" (National Center for Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NCECQA), 2022, n.p.). QRIS standards vary from state to state but typically begin with the state's licensing standards as a minimum requirement, followed by higher levels of quality programming. Programs receive technical assistance and financial incentives, with quality measured through a variety of ways, such as on-site observations, program self-assessment, and review of documents. QRIS ratings are shared with families and the public, often posted on state websites (NCECQA, 2022).

In 2016, 93% of the states with QRIS reported using standardized environmental assessment tools for observing and evaluating learning environments. In some states, these observation-based tools were used to assign a score of quality for the program, while some used them for program self-assessment. For example, one- and two-star rated programs in the Pennsylvania Keystone STARS Quality Rating Improvement System used observation to self-evaluate their strengths and areas for improvement. Three- and four-star rated programs were required to have specific scores on their assessment (NCECQA, 2017). Following is a description of the most frequently used environmental observational tools.

Environmental Rating Scales (ERS)

The Environmental Rating Scales are a set of assessments of the program quality of early childhood or school-age childcare. There are four age levels of assessments:

- The Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-3)
- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-3)
- The Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale (FCCERS-3)
- The School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS-Updated)

While some of the assessment items are based upon documentation, most of the "process quality" is assessed through observation by trained assessors. Items that are assessed are those that have been found to lead to positive child outcomes, such as interactions between staff and children, families, and among the children themselves. Environmental features, such as space and furnishings, materials, schedule, and learning activities, are assessed through observation in terms of how they support these interactions (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2023). For example, an assessment of the ECERS-3 item "Promoting Acceptance of Diversity" would require an observation of materials available for the children, in terms of cultural and racial diversity in books, displayed pictures, and play materials (Center for Early Learning Professionals, 2016). Extensive research on the Environment Rating Scales has shown them to be a valid and reliable assessment of quality that leads to positive child development outcomes (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2023).

Classroom Assessment and Scoring System (CLASS)

The Classroom Assessment and Scoring System (CLASS) is designed to measure and help improve interactions in a classroom as a primary means of supporting children's learning, development, and academic success (Teachstone, 2025). CLASS is an observational-based assessment that can be used with six different age levels:

- Infant
- Toddler
- Pre-K
- K–3
- Upper elementary
- Secondary

The CLASS tool has four cycles of 15-minute observations of teachers and students, done by a trained and certified observer. Three categories of teacher–child interactions are evaluated: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Examples of interactions assessed for emotional support are how teachers respond to children, help them resolve problems, provide comfort and encouragement, and focus on their interests and points of views. Classroom organization is assessed in terms of routines and procedures, management of children's behaviors, and the use of sensitive and appropriate guidance strategies. The area of instructional support

is evaluated by observations of teachers' implementation of curriculum and how they support children's problem-solving, provide feedback, and encourage children to ask questions. CLASS: Pre-K was chosen by the Office of Head Start to meet the Head Start Act's requirement that program quality is monitored by a "valid and reliable research based observational instrument" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). A sample of classrooms in a program are selected to be observed, with scores representative of the program. The Office of Head Start requires that the trained observer be fluent in the predominant language used in the class. Over 10 years of research in more than 6,000 Pre-K through third-grade classrooms have validated the effectiveness of CLASS in evaluating and improving teacher–child interactions, with gains in student achievement and social skills (Head Start / ECLKC, 2023; University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development, 2023; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025).

Connections 2.7

Watch the Teachstone (2017) video, "A Teachers Take on CLASS Observations." If you were being observed by a CLASS-trained observer, what concerns might you have prior to the observation? How could you use the observation results to improve your teaching?

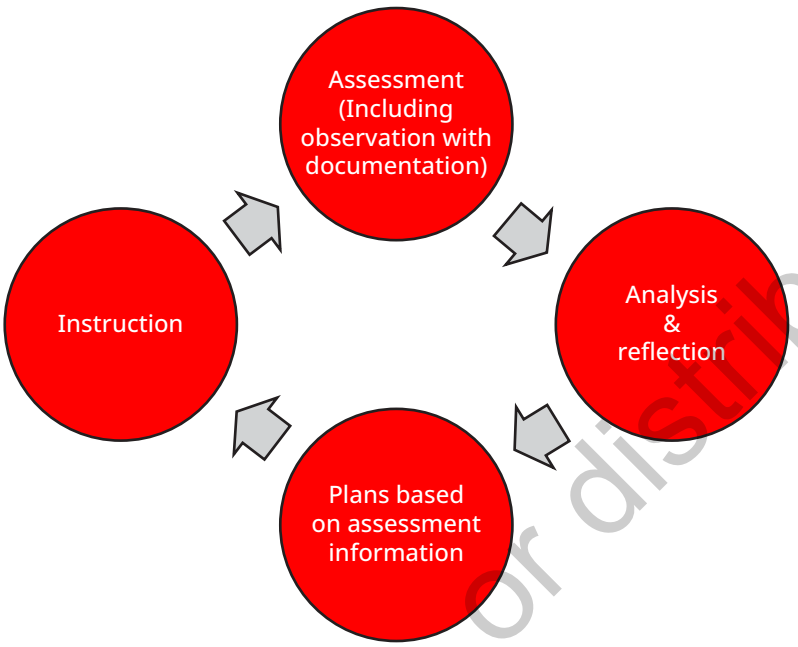
Observation, Documentation, and the Instructional Cycle

Observing and documenting children's learning will not mean much if the information is not used. An **instructional cycle** that demonstrates the ongoing, cyclical nature of using assessment as the foundation for instruction can be one way to ensure that assessment information is used to meet the needs of children's learning and development.

While there are several different models of an instructional cycle, Figure 2.6 streamlines the model for early childhood into four steps:

- Assessment: The first element of quality teaching and learning is not planning a lesson or activity. It is ongoing assessments to determine your students' knowledge, skills, and needs (Head Start / ECLKC, 2022a). Through observation and other means of assessment, you can then make plans of how to best support their learning and development. These observations are based upon developmental milestones or curricular standards that serve as the goals for your students. Observation combined with other skill-specific assessments can give you balanced information about a child that can then be used to plan activities that are appropriate and challenging (McDonald, 2018).
- Analysis and reflection: Understanding what the information means that you learned from your observations and other assessments is crucial in using it for planning purposes. It is important to take a step back from your observations and review the information, asking yourself: "What are my next steps with this child(ren) based on this information?" One note: The instructional cycle is only useful if the assessment data is valid and reliable information. If observations records have errors, are incomplete, or are biased, then

Figure 2.6 ▪ The Instructional Cycle in Early Childhood



decisions made based upon the data can be faulty. In your analysis, always consider whether the information is accurate or if more observations are needed.

- Plans based upon assessment information: Your assessment information will then help you make instructional decisions and curricular adjustments. It can also help you design your learning environment to support children's play. Meaningful learning experiences occur when your plans reflect the children's knowledge, skills, interests, and the learning needs they have. This also prevents you from planning lessons and activities that are either too easy and repetitive of knowledge and skills children have or are too advanced and frustrating for them.
- Instruction: In this step of the instructional cycle, you'll use teaching strategies that combine open-ended experiences, child-directed initiatives, and teacher-guided activities based upon children's needs and interests (McDonald, 2018). You can do this because you began your teaching with skilled observations and other assessment methods that helped you know your students well. The cycle continues as you observe and document your students' responses to your instruction.

Summary

In this chapter, you have learned about observation as the foundational assessment tool in early childhood education. Being intentional in your observations by planning for the *who, what, where, when, why*, and *how* you will document them will give you valuable information about the children in your classroom. Understanding the legal and ethical guidelines for observation, as well as the typical errors that can occur, can help you use this assessment method effectively. It is also important to remember that observation-based assessments are not only for assessing the students

in your class but also for evaluating your program or school's learning environments. Finally, the instructional cycle, with assessment as the first step in teaching, can help you understand how observation-based assessments fit in the teaching and learning process.

Applying Your Knowledge

Infant/Toddler Case Study

Gabrielle had been a toddler teacher for almost 10 years. She was familiar with common behavior issues that toddlers have, including biting. When a new child, Henry, enrolled into her program and immediately exhibited biting behaviors, she decided that she needed to determine why he was biting the other children and even occasionally a teacher. She used her program's observation record form to document what occurred every time he bit someone. After two weeks of recording her observations, she noted that Henry bit

- when he was angry about having to transition to a new activity,
- when he did not want to leave an area where he was playing,
- when he was excited, and
- when he wanted to play with a toy that another child had.

While reviewing her notes with her assistant teacher, Gabrielle noted a pattern in her observation records. Henry's biting actions seemed to happen when he did not have the words to communicate his needs or wants or was unable to express strong feelings such as anger, frustration, or joy. Gabrielle discussed some ideas with his family, and they decided they would continue to monitor and correct Henry's behavior to try and prevent biting incidents but would also begin teaching Henry sign language that he could use, such as "more," "yes/no," "play," and "done." Within weeks, the biting incidents decreased as Henry was able to communicate his thoughts and feelings through signs. (Adapted from Zero to Three, 2016).

1. What are the *who, what, when, where*, and *why* of intentional observations in this case?
2. How does Gabrielle use the instructional cycle to help Henry learn appropriate behaviors in his classroom?
3. Do you think Henry's biting behavior would have decreased without Gabrielle's intentional observations? Why or why not?
4. It can be challenging for infant/toddler teachers to regularly and immediately document observations of the children in their care. What would be some suggestions for Gabrielle and her assistant teacher to make it easy to record observations of Henry's (and the other children's) behaviors when they occur?

Preschool Case Study

Melinda was a first-year teacher in a public school preschool program where she had 40 students: 21 in the morning and 19 in the afternoon. At her back-to-school meeting, Harriet, the school's director, informed the group that they would be increasing the observational assessments done to get a better understanding of the children's learning and development. Harriet stated that there should be a minimum of one observation of a portfolio standard done every week for every

student. While Melinda had the help of Olivia, her teaching assistant, she could not imagine how she would have time to meet this requirement for 40 children weekly. However, she and Olivia worked out a schedule for observing four or five children daily while they were playing at the different learning centers in the classroom. They also planned to observe multiple children playing in groups, as much as possible, to be more efficient in their documentation. They planned to take turns doing their documentation so one teacher was still available to supervise and provide support for the children's play.

During the first week, several problems occurred with their plans. At times when one of them was observing, the need arose for them to step in and provide behavior guidance or get more supplies for the activities. Several of the observations were incomplete because of these interruptions. Some of the recordings were done after the children left and not immediately while observing them. On one of the days, the local fire department visited with their fire truck to do fire safety lessons, and there was no opportunity that day to do observations. The children scheduled to be observed that day had no documents in their portfolio at the end of the week. Melinda and Olivia also found it difficult to observe a specific standard if the play activities did not provide opportunities to observe the standard. Their schedule did not allow much time to reflect and talk about their observations, and when Melinda looked through them at the end of the week, she found that she and Olivia had different styles in how they documented their observations, with Olivia providing few details and, at times, writing her opinions about the children rather than objective observations. Melinda was discouraged that their assessment efforts seemed unsuccessful but was hesitant to talk to Harriet about it next week. She did not want Harriet to think she was unqualified for the job and vowed to try harder the next week.

1. What types of observation errors likely occurred with Melinda's and Olivia's assessment efforts?
2. If Melinda uses the observation reports on the students to plan her next lessons and activities, how would observation errors affect her instructional plans?
3. Should Melinda talk to Harriet about the difficulties she had with the assessment mandate? If so, what should she tell her?
4. How might Melinda and Olivia improve their assessment efforts to get valid and reliable observation information on 40 children?

Primary Grades Case Study

As a part of her master's degree program, Rosanna wanted to research strategies for helping the social-emotional skills of Rico, a student in her first-grade class who had experienced trauma in his young life. Rico displayed behaviors, such as physical aggression with his classmates, noncompliance with classroom rules, verbal disrespect with adults, and emotional outbursts. The school's counselor recommended that Rosanna work on building a stronger, caring relationship with him by spending 10 minutes of one-on-one time with him each day, talking with him about his interests. She suggested that getting to know him better and having a trusting relationship with him would help decrease his negative behaviors. Rosanna decided to implement this strategy and document whether it reduced his challenging behaviors. She created a checklist of the behaviors she hoped to eliminate, with space for comments. For six weeks, Rosanna found time during the school day to spend with Rico, where they talked about many nonschool-related topics, such as

his favorite superheroes or his siblings. During this time, she also observed and kept a tally of his behaviors with notes about them. At the end of six weeks, she had this documentation:

Physical aggression: decreased from four times a week to twice a week

Noncompliance with classroom rules: decreased from eight times a week to three times a week

Verbal disrespect with adults: decreased from six times a week to no incidents the last week

Emotional outbursts: no decrease (or increase) seen

Her comments about his observed behaviors noted that his physical aggression included hitting or pushing classmates when they did not share playground equipment with him. His noncompliant behaviors were primarily shouting "no!" or arguing with her when asked to complete a task. His verbal disrespect included comments like "you can't make me" and "you're not the boss." His emotional outbursts were crying uncontrollably, tearing up his papers, or throwing crayons when angry or upset. Rosanna noted positive behaviors during their private time together such as smiling, laughing, showing her pictures he had drawn, holding her hand when they walked to the playground, and asking her to read books to him. However, she did note emotional outbursts occurred when she ended their private conversation time.

1. With a classmate, analyze Rosanna's observation records. What can you learn about Rico from her documentation?
2. Was Rosanna's strategy of giving Rico extra one-on-one attention successful? In what ways?
3. Based upon Rosanna's observations, what would you recommend for Rosanna's next steps with Rico in helping improve his social-emotional skills?
4. Rosanna primarily documented Rico's negative behaviors. How might she revise her observation instrument to also note Rico's pro-social behaviors and whether her relationship-building strategy increased them?

Key Terms

engagement
interval recording
instructional cycle
mandated reporters
multilingual learners (MLLs)
non-participant observation
observation
objectivity
one-to-one correspondence
participant observation
Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS)
sociogram
time sampling

Chapter Learning Objectives Assessments

CLO 2.1 Choose one age group (infant/toddlers, preschool, or primary grades) and prepare a presentation you would make for a family meeting that explains how you use observation as an assessment method. Include suggestions for how the children's families can be intentional about observing their child's growth and development at home.

CLO 2.2 With a partner or small group, create a plan for how you would do ongoing observation-based assessments with your students. Include in your plan the actions you would do before your observations, how you would document your observations while doing them, and different ways you will reflect upon your assessment information after your observations. Include a description of the legal and ethical practices in your observation-based assessment plan.

CLO 2.3 Conduct three to five observations of children in some type of group setting, such as a park playground, childcare setting, or school classroom. After recording each observation, reflect upon the common errors that can occur during observations and tell the actions you took to avoid those errors during your observation. (Note: If in a public setting, such as a park, it is ethical to ask permission to record your observations of the adult supervising the child.)

CLO 2.4 Create T-charts comparing the advantages and disadvantages of observation-based assessments of individual children with those of assessing a group of children. Give a specific example of why you might do an observation-based assessment of a group of children and how you would avoid the common errors that occur when doing them.

CLO 2.5 Choose one of the 10 standards for National Association for the Education of Young Children's Early Learning Program Accreditation (found on NAEYC's Early Learning Program Quality Assessment & Accreditation website) and create a list of "Look Fors" of what you would expect to see if you observed this standard to evaluate a program.

CLO 2.6 Create a video for those new in the field of early childhood care and education, such as teaching assistants or beginning education students, that explains the role of assessment in the instructional cycle. In your video, give examples of how you would complete each step of the cycle when teaching young children.