

# Assessing Young Children



Article by Dr. Cathy Grace

<http://www.pbs.org/teachers/earlychildhood/articles/assessing.html>

The measurement of young children's growth is accomplished in a variety of ways. Using a wall chart and door facing, we can chart growth in height; with a set of scales, we can determine if a child has gained weight from the last time she was weighed. Measurement tools range from a yardstick to a sample of work with numerous assessment strategies in between. The challenge facing early childhood educators is to use the course and to use common sense in the decisions that are made regarding the assessment of children.

As high-stakes testing becomes a reality in more and more states, early childhood educators are often put in the awkward position of defending the belief that the young child's learning in all developmental areas is a continuous and ongoing assessment, and that methods may be more accurate than the once-a-year testing event.

One of the most comprehensive on-going techniques is the student portfolio. The portfolio is a system for the collection of authentic assessment. Authentic assessment is a term that conveys that students are given opportunities to work in the application of skills in the same ways that they are used in the "real" world outside of school. Authentic products of children's work that reflects real situations and problems addressed in the learning environment, rather than contrived instructional situations. The collection of these work samples along with the recording of observations of children's interactions and comments serve to progress over time in a variety of situations. The key to the effective use of information collected through this approach is the teacher's knowledge of child development and skill as a keen observer.

Prior to the collection of the work samples and observational records, teachers should establish the criteria to guide the children in the selection of the work and the recording of observations. The criteria should be based on the instructional program and research-based child development milestones. The method of collecting and recording the children's behavior and responses varies. The method depends on the size of the class, the number of teachers observing and interacting with the children on a daily basis. All work collected and observations recorded must be dated and accompanied by brief statement to explain the context in which the work was done. This method of collection is critical in the development of a timeline of progress that this system promotes. Children's successes are being monitored, not their failures. The observation and collection of work is to be viewed as part of the instructional process and not separate. It is done with the student that makes the assessment real and personal.

Teachers can conference with children as young as four years about the work they feel should be kept in the portfolio. This conferencing is a part of the instructional time as children are beginning to evaluate their work against a standard and to discuss the process they went through in completing the task. Teachers, in their use of questions and comments, can lead children, often slowly at first, to embrace the process of learning as well as the product of their work through the conferencing process. For children who want the work to go home and to remain in the portfolio, a copying machine easily solves the dilemma. Using photographs and

constructing block structures to record projects provide a means to capture cooperative learning experiences as well as illustrations of progress in the use of various media and construction materials.

Examples of authentic work samples are:

- Children's art work collected periodically throughout the year
- Samples of children's writing such as in journals or with the case of very young children, writing attempts such as writing their name on a picture or attempting to design a menu for the "restaurant" being constructed in the dramatic play area of the classroom
- Photographs of a child's block tower or snap block structure
- Photographs of children's cooperative work such as murals or the on-going record keeping analysis of the temperature for a month

Portfolios are used as the center-piece of parental conferences. Children five years and older are encouraged to conference with their parents and the teacher to explain the work and why it is included in the portfolio. Pass along portfolios are those that move from grade to grade, following the child. At the conclusion of a school year, the parents and child determine the work that will be passed along and the work that will stay home. Some teachers send the portfolios home at the end of the school year for parents to keep and reflect upon during the years to come.

Numerous on-going assessment systems for young children are available. These systems guide the teacher's observations and offer a means to assess curriculum and determine if children are being given opportunities to grow in all domains. The following sites offer further information on some of the most widely used assessment systems:

- High/Scope: The Child Observation Record  
<http://www.highscope.org/>
- Teaching Strategies: Comprehensive Curriculum, Assessment, and Evaluation for Early Childhood Education  
<http://www.teachingstrategies.com/>

National early childhood associations have encouraged researchers and practitioners to develop position statements around the issue of appropriate assessment for young children. To gain access to those statements go to <http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/> and <http://www.naeyc.org/>. These position statements can be used in discussions with parents and school administrators in explaining the reasons why on-going assessment is a responsible way of sharing real information about young children's progress.

The assessment of young children is the celebration of their lives and advancements if teachers view it as such. Information gained in the assessment process can also be used in the planning of work that addresses the needs of the child. Evidence of the collection of work samples and teacher observations. And most importantly, it can be used as a tool in the sharing of progress with the child's family and with the child herself.

About the Author

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