



Assessing children's learning—work in progress! (Part 1)

Note: This two-part e-Newsletter summarises important basic information about assessing children's learning and illustrates it with the perspectives and experiences of one service, Gowrie Victoria, Docklands in Melbourne. Part 1 focuses on why assessment is important, what informs assessments and ongoing continual assessment. Part 2 focuses mainly on periodic summary assessments and collaborating with children and families in assessing children's learning.

Much of the content that follows comes from a discussion with Team Leaders at Gowrie Victoria, Docklands. Text in italics indicates comments from these educators.



Knowing children well is fundamental to good quality practice in any education and care service. Educators aim to know each child as a unique human being, including their interests, strengths, temperament, personality as well as what they know, can do and understand. Knowing children well also includes knowing about the family, cultural and community contexts of their lives.

The term *assessment* refers to the various ways educators learn about the children they work with. The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) defines assessment as 'the process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand. It is part of an ongoing cycle that includes planning, documenting and evaluating children's learning' (p. 17).

Knowing a child well is essential for building a strong relationship where the child feels valued and secure. These relationships are essential for children to learn. Deep detailed knowledge of each child contributes significantly to plans for the curriculum or program. Assessments also provide evidence to educators, children and their families about children's progress.

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 17) lists a number of reasons that assessment is essential. It enables:

- effective planning
- communication about children's learning and progress
- awareness of all children's learning progress
- reduction of impediments to learning progress
- identification of children who need extra help and providing that help or assisting families to access it
- evaluation of the effectiveness of the program or curriculum
- critical reflection and subsequent improvements in pedagogy
- making learning visible to children, families, educators and other professionals.

What informs assessments of children's learning?

The Learning Outcomes in the EYLF and *My Time, Our Place* (MTOP) (DEEWR, 2011), when understood in detail, offer a broad and rich perspective on learning. Deep understanding of the Learning Outcomes expands rather than limits educators' ideas about children's learning.

The Learning Outcomes have broadened our concepts of learning. Educators now view everything as a learning opportunity. We look for learning all the time, not just in pre-planned so-called 'learning activities'.

At Gowrie Victoria, Docklands educators use a diagram that reminds them of the detail in the Learning Outcomes.



Considering different perspectives on learning enriches assessment. Discussing ideas with children, families and colleagues makes it more likely that assessments will be accurate. Educators also bring their knowledge of early childhood theories and research that relates to learning.

The service statement of philosophy will foreground particular values or emphases that inform assessments. There may be particular aims or a focus for a period of time across a service. For example, at Gowrie Victoria, Docklands, staff decide on a broad goal for the year for the whole centre.

Gowrie Victoria, Docklands has made a commitment to engagement in 2014. This allows us to strengthen our partnerships with families, children and the surrounding communities as well as foster meaningful and respectful relationships. We endeavor to establish a culture of community learning through engagement with each other and our community. We will do this by ensuring that all individuals have opportunities to engage with the service in ways that meet their individual needs.

At Gowrie Victoria, Docklands the EYLF, the centre's statement of philosophy and the broad long-term goals provide a context for each room to set its own goals to work toward for the year. In addition there are short-term goals for each child, determined through discussion with families and children where appropriate. All of these goals inform assessment as well as curriculum.

Elements related to assessment in the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2011)

1.1.2: Each child's current knowledge, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation for the program.

1.1.4: The documentation about each child's program and progress is available to families.

1.2.1: Each child's learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documentation and evaluation.

Continual assessment

Educators who aim for continuous improvement assess children's learning continually. As they work they watch, listen, have conversations with children and attend to their work and play. They exchange information with families. They talk with children and their families about children's interests, challenges they face and what they know, can do and understand. There is a culture within the service of sharing and discussing insights, questions and observations about children's learning. Sometimes they talk with children directly about their learning. Over time they build up an increasingly nuanced and detailed picture of each child. As one educator said, 'It's just what we do—not just at specific times but all the time'.

Noticing and collecting information, however, is only part of what assessment is. The other crucial part is analysing, interpreting, discussing, asking questions and wondering about the meaning of what has been observed and what it says about what a child has learned or is learning—in other words, critically reflecting.



Questions to employ in critical reflection include:

- Why is this worth noticing?
- What does it tell me about what the child has learned or is learning? Is this the first time this has occurred? Is it unusual? Is it typical? Is it occurring over and over?
- What do others, including colleagues, the child and the child's family, think this information means?
- What questions do I have? What do I wonder about? How can I find the answers to my questions?
- How does what I have observed relate to the Learning Outcomes and other 'big ideas' in the EYLF and MTOP?
- How does the context help me interpret what I have observed?
- What are the implications for practice? (Stonehouse, 2011)

Each educator or team of educators needs to develop skills and find ways of documenting children's learning that are effective for them. At Gowrie Victoria, Docklands each room has its own way of recording and of linking assessments to planning.

Recording ongoing assessment

In addition to assessing informally and keeping those assessments in mind, the *National Quality Standard* requires educators to document or record assessments of children's learning.

We need to have a system in the room to make sure we record significant moments and track progress over time. Especially because we have many children attending part-time and therefore a large number of children over a week, we have to have a system to make sure we continue to learn about each child.

While most educators accept that documenting children's learning is crucial, many wonder how much documentation is enough. Some educators have the opposite problem—namely a tendency to document too much.

It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking you need to write everything down—that the more you write down the better. What matters most is that learning is happening and what you are doing to contribute to it. You don't want to detract from the quality of the experience and the relationship by racing off to get the camera or stopping to record something. It's more important that it happens than that it is recorded!

We've moved away from documenting for the sake of documenting. We're being much more selective and focusing on quality rather than quantity.

Some educators find it helpful to identify focus children for a period of time, to ensure that over time there is assessment of every child.

Having focus children works for us, but it's a flexible system. We look at the learning of all children, not just the focus children.

Other educators believe that having focus children interferes with careful observations of all children all the time.

Photographs are widely used in records of assessments of children's learning. It is important for educators to reflect critically on their value. While they are appealing, photos on their own do not provide much information about learning. Photos are evidence of what children are *doing* rather than what they are *learning or have learned*. A photo accompanying a written record of assessment of learning can add to its value however.



Initial observations or notes can be very informal—a jotting made on a Post-it note for example, that an educator might make while working. It is important to analyse the notes or jotting as soon as possible, while the memory of what was noted is still fresh.

A system for turning those jottings, with analysis, into something more significant enables educators to share information with each other. A format can include questions and prompts to help educators analyse and interpret what they have observed. At Gowrie Victoria, Docklands educators create in collaboration with each child a scrapbook that contains a collection of samples of children's work with their comments and comments from educators, learning stories, and a combination of handwritten informal notes and more formal assessments. Records of their learning may include voice recordings. Every scrapbook is different.

Learning stories are currently very popular with educators across Australia. However, there are many different versions of what are called learning stories, some more valuable than others. There are a number of other valuable ways to document assessments.

While it is probably a good idea to have a way of making sure that each child's learning is being assessed and making records of those assessments, it does not make sense to restrict assessments to prescribed intervals or to require a certain number of assessments per week or fortnight. With any child on a given day there may be a number of observations worth recording and then several days may pass when you don't record anything.

We make sure we have documented at least one incident for each child every month as a minimum, but of course we collect information whenever there's something worth documenting.

Conclusion

Assessing children's learning truly is a work in progress that involves everyone—educators, families and children. In Part 2 of this e-Newsletter the focus is on turning everyday evidence of learning into more synthesised and integrated pictures of children as learners.

Some questions for reflection:

What is your attitude and what are the attitudes of people you work with toward assessing children's learning?

How do you decide what's worth recording?

What happens in your service to promote and actively encourage critical reflection and analysis of observations?

Do you critically reflect on the ways you assess children's learning with the aim of improving?

How do you involve families in assessing children's learning?

How do you involve children in assessing their learning?

How accessible and meaningful to children are the records of assessments of their learning? What can you do to improve accessibility and meaning?

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Biography

Anne Stonehouse lives in Melbourne and is a consultant in early childhood. She was a member of the consortium that developed the national *Early Years Learning Framework*.

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