Assessing children’s learning—work in progress! (Part 2)

Note: This is the second part of a two-part e-Newsletter that 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. Familiarity with the content of Part 1 will make the content of Part 2 more useful.

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.

‘Points-in-time’ assessment

‘Point-in-time’ syntheses or summaries of each child’s learning are crucial. Educators bring together all individual pieces of assessment and create an up-to-date profile, noting progress as well as challenges and areas of learning or behaviour that need attention or are of concern.

Some of the important uses for these summary assessments are to:

- support ongoing communication and sharing of insights and information in order to build an up-to-date shared picture of the child’s learning with colleagues, families and the child
- promote the child’s sense of him- or herself as a learner
- inform planning the program for that child
- provide information to educators when the child is transitioning from one group or service to another, for example starting school.

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.
As with individual records of assessments, there are many good formats or templates. Educators and teams choose one that helps them to think broadly and holistically about a child’s learning, using the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and My Time, Our Place (MTOP) Learning Outcomes. Useful templates help educators attend to the detail of children’s learning rather than simply using the headings of identity, contribution and connection, wellbeing, learning and communication.

The EYLF emphasises attention to children’s progress in assessments. Highlighting ‘the different pathways that children take toward achieving these outcomes’, the focus is on ‘distance travelled’, not exclusively on ‘endpoints’. Robust assessments ‘recognise and celebrate not only the giant leaps that children take in their learning but the small steps as well’ (p. 17).

Choosing a helpful format is important, as the format shapes thinking and analysis. For example, using a checklist may lead to educators focusing only on items in the checklist and adopting a simplistic ‘yes-no’ approach to children’s learning and development. The other extreme, writing summaries of a child’s learning and development without using any kind of guide, may lead to the same outcome—missing important learning. Many educators find it helpful to use several formats simultaneously.

Teams and individual educators will benefit from considering a variety of ways of writing summary assessments and finding ways that work well for them. One ‘test’ of a good summary assessment is whether it captures the uniqueness of that child at that time rather than consisting of general statements that could apply to any child.

Assessments need to highlight strengths and abilities. Areas where there are challenges are written in ways that are respectful and optimistic.

At Gowrie Victoria, Docklands the aim is to have at least one meaningful piece of documentation, where various records of assessments are brought together, for each child every month. Twice a year educators write a thorough assessment that covers all learning areas.

Following is one example of a half-yearly assessment at Gowrie Victoria, Docklands:

Oliver has settled into Gowrie Victoria, Docklands with ease. He has built strong connections with his educators and developed a sense of belonging and security in his new environment. This is evident as he separates confidently from Mum or Dad in the morning and will go to any educator happily. Oliver’s ability to trust and feel comfortable is also apparent in his interactions with educators unfamiliar to him, as he readily accepts new faces and interacts positively with them.

In the first six months of this year, Oliver has developed many skills that allow him to be increasingly independent. He has mastered crawling, pulling himself up to standing using furniture and he now walks independently.

He has also developed good hand-eye coordination, which enables him to successfully eat independently and drink from a glass.

Oliver’s success in developing large motor muscles and hand-eye coordination has enabled him to engage with the environment at a new level. He now actively resources his own learning. He selects what he wants to engage with. He is beginning to show interest in creative experiences such as painting at the easel. Oliver readily joins in with group experiences such as singing and dancing by clapping along with the song or moving to the music. It is wonderful to see Oliver act on what he is curious about and interested in. He is building his skills of inquiry and experimentation and becoming increasingly confident as a learner.

We are enjoying watching Oliver master so many skills so far this year and seeing new skills and interests emerging. We look forward to learning more about his skills and interests as the year progresses and to helping him build on those.

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.
Collaborating with families and children to assess children’s learning

The EYLF emphasises assessing in collaboration with families and children. In addition to being a sign of respect, there are other benefits:

- Families can support their child’s learning more effectively.
- Families are empowered as advocates for their child.
- Educators learn more about the child.
- Children gain an understanding of themselves as learners.

  From the first encounter we aim to build the idea with families that assessment of their child’s learning is a collaboration.

At Gowrie Victoria, Docklands the educators take very seriously the obligation to share children’s learning with families and the value of doing so. In one room they are trialling a system that will ensure that they do not miss out on opportunities to share something about their child’s day with families.

We have a sheet with the names of all the children attending that day. We aim to write down something specific that has happened with each child during the day to share with families when they pick their child up. It’s not written for them to read—we think that it’s important for an educator to tell them about it. It’s also important that it’s just about their child, not the group. We’re trying to go beyond the ‘this is what we did today’ kind of reporting.

They also share photos of their child with families, sometimes sending them during the day.

  I think a photo far outweighs words, not to communicate about learning, but to show them that their child is okay, happy and involved.

Photos are also a great prompt to use in conversations with children about their own learning and are often used in this way at Gowrie Victoria, Docklands.

At Gowrie Victoria, Docklands educators believe it is vital that children not only have access to their portfolios, which contain assessments, but that they also have a say about what goes into them. They can ask for work or a record of work to be included, not to be included or to be removed.

  Children play a vital role in assessing their learning. They can tell you what they are capable of. The more empowered they are in their own experience the more aware they become of what they are capable of. They know when they’ve achieved something. It’s not only respectful to collaborate with them in their learning, but it also leads to more insightful assessments.

We encourage children to take photos of experiences, people and events that matter to them. Then we ask them to talk about what the picture is about. We learn a lot that way.

Seeing the records of their learning is a powerful reminder not only to us and to their families but also to them as well of where they were as learners and in their development and how far they’ve come.

  Involving children in assessing their learning gives us insights into what is meaningful to the child, what matters to them.

Conclusion

No matter what processes and formats for recording are used, what matters most is that assessments of children’s learning and development contribute to the quality of children’s experiences.

Educators need to critically reflect about how to assess children’s learning more effectively and efficiently in order to know them well. They need to be certain that the return from the amount of time and energy they invest in assessing makes it worthwhile.
There’s a culture of assessment here. Critical reflection about many things is part of our culture. We trust and respect each other and we value different perspectives and learn from them. You put an idea on the table and you know it will be valued. We’ve had to work hard to engender trust. Everyone here is an educator. People genuinely believe that regardless of experience or qualifications everyone has something to contribute and we will all learn from it. When you can see this culture benefits children there’s no question—you buy into it.

Assessing children’s learning is definitely a work in progress!

Some questions for reflection:

- What is your attitude and 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?

Postscript: Readers may feel frustrated that this is yet another resource about assessment that doesn’t recommend the best or right way to go about it. In fact, there isn’t such a thing as the best or right way. Educators who work together have to explore a variety of ways, perhaps by sharing ideas with other educators and services, borrow the best ideas and design their own processes and formats. As with so many aspects of working as an educator, there are no simple answers or recipes!

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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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References
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