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Rocking and Rolling: Bringing Observation and Documentation to Life in Infant and Toddler Settings

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Gabriella, a teacher of 2- and 3-year-olds, looks over her class list. One of her children, Harrison, is absent again today. "Hmmm," she thinks. "Nine absences this month. I hope everything's all right." She makes a note to share the attendance information with her program's family support specialist; perhaps there's a way to support Harrison's family in their efforts to get him to school.

Next, Gabriella reaches into her pocket and pulls out several sticky notes. One says "Camila, cows, vocab." She remembers how earlier in the day, Camila had pulled the cow puppet onto her hand and told a story about the cow taking a bath. "Camila's vocabulary is really taking off," Gabriella thinks. "Maybe we should read some stories about farm animals if she's interested in cows."

A quick look at the calendar reminds Gabriella that at their next meeting, staff will hear about the results from a recent program-wide observation of teacher-child interactions and classroom climate. "I wonder what that will mean for our classroom," she thinks.

Research shows that the experiences children have in early childhood influence their development and later school success. Specifically, children who experience higher quality care in early childhood are more likely to have better educational and social outcomes than children in lower quality settings. These associations persist through adolescence, shining a spotlight on the central role that early learning experiences play in children's development (La Paro, Williamson, & Hatfield 2014).

Meaningful assessment practices can help guide the selection of curriculum and instructional approaches used with very young children. These practices can also help us in our own professional journeys, providing insight into our practices, strengths, and needs. At the classroom or program level, aggregate (or combined) data can show progress toward program outcomes for children and can help staff identify professional development goals.

While early childhood educators have a wealth of choices when it comes to collecting assessment information (see "Screenings and Other Formal Assessment Tools" below), they most often rely on conducting and recording observations with infants and toddlers. These observations can happen quite naturally across the day—during everyday routines (drop-off, mealtimes, and naptimes) and during play. This article focuses on the steps educators can take to understand and use the information they gather.

Bringing Information to Life in Our Work

As Patricia McDonald (2018) writes, "Teachers are researchers, observing children to decide how to extend their learning both in the moment and by planning new play environments" (32). The observations infant and toddler teachers make can provide rich insights into the very young child's experiences, including

- their interests. Where do their passions lie? (Dinosaurs? Dancing and singing? Garbage trucks?)
- their development. Are they showing early milestones toward walking (pulling up, creeping along furniture) or toileting (signaling when they are going to have a bowel movement)?
- their needs. Perhaps a 6-month-old cannot hold their bottle independently but can do so with support.
- their temperament, likes, and dislikes. For example, some children may tolerate a block tower falling over and over again while others may be distressed the first time the blocks collapse.

Teachers can collect and record these observations in several ways. They may make a quick note on a sticky pad; take a video or photo; make a note in the child's chart or daily record; and/or record "frequency counts" of how often a specific behavior (like biting) is observed. Whatever system a teacher uses, it is important to partner with other staff in their setting so that everyone uses a similar approach.

Regardless of how it is gathered, assessment information—including informal observation and other, more formal practices—is meaningful only when it is understood and brought to life in the early learning program. Educators can follow a three-step process to guide how they interpret and act on the information they collect.

1. Reflection: What Does It Mean?

Early childhood educators gather information about children for a variety of reasons. They may want to track a child's development, needs, and strengths; assess a program's compliance activities; or examine their own teaching practices and classroom climate. They can observe individual children or an entire class (which is particularly helpful when tracking progress toward a specific learning objective, such as rhyming, counting, or engaging in different types of play). Once they have gathered the information, they can connect with a supervisor or other staff member, family members, or even the children who participated in the observation to identify themes and insights and to reflect on what the information means (Scott-Little & Reschke 2022). Reflection questions could include

- What does this assessment information tell me about children's learning and development?

- What does it tell me about my teaching practices?
- What can I learn about the classroom climate, including how I interact with children and how they interact with each other?
- Does this information capture how children are accessing, mastering, and applying new knowledge and skills?

2. Feedback: What Is the Context?

There is a lot going on in an early learning program at any point in time, and that context may contribute to the "story" that observation and documentation tells. For example, perhaps an observation took place after a lockdown or fire drill, so children were more distressed and unsettled than usual. Or perhaps it occurred after a new staff member joined the classroom. When analyzing observations, it is important to consider these contexts and the ways they influence what we observe. This could prompt teachers to plan for additional observation.

Knowledge of the children (and families) in our settings is another important source of feedback. Teachers should consider how culture, language, background knowledge, immigration experiences, family strengths, and more influence children's learning. This intentional awareness of each child's unique context, strengths, and needs is aligned to developmentally appropriate practice: "The methods of assessment are responsive to the current developmental accomplishments, language(s), and experiences of young children. They recognize individual variation in learners and allow children to demonstrate their competencies in different ways" (NAEYC 2022).

3. Action Planning: What Comes Next?

Once teachers collect information, they can review it regularly to identify areas of growth and areas for attention or changes they may want to make. Based on their observations, teachers can design playful learning activities that are intentional and responsive to children's interests and abilities (Head Start 2022). When planning these activities, teachers might ask themselves the following questions (Peterson & Elam 2020):

- How can I set up the environment to better meet children's needs? Do I need to change routines, materials, or schedules?

- What milestones or learning objectives can I support through planned experiences?
- What resources or materials do I need to meet these objectives?
- Do I need to consider modifications, adaptations, or other adjustments to support each and every child's meaningful participation in learning experiences?

For example, imagine that observations over time showed that teachers were engaging in fewer conversations with emergent multilingual learners compared with monolingual children (Hannon 2019). Seeing these data, teachers might assign a group of children to each staff member in the room, with the goal that adults engage each of "their" children in multiple conversations a day. At the program level, directors might decide to invest in professional development designed to enrich the language environment.

Informal observations can also guide adult learning by providing an opportunity for teachers to reflect and consider their own professional strengths and needs. After implementing any changes, educators can plan to collect follow-up data: Did the adjustments lead to anticipated outcomes? If not, why? Is more time needed to implement the changes, or should teachers try other approaches instead?

Screenings and Other Formal Assessment Tools

Teacher observations and documentation are usually informal ways of assessing the infant and toddler environment. If concerns about a child's development arise—either from educators or the family—then a developmental screening may be in order. For example, if a toddler is consistently demonstrating repetitive behaviors, such as spinning or hand-flapping, further evaluation may be warranted.

Developmental screenings allow teachers and other professionals to formally compare a child's current skills and behaviors to a set of established norms. They include the Ages & States Questionnaire, BRIGANCE, and DENVER II, among others (Macy & Bagnato 2022). These screenings, typically administered by professionals outside the program, may indicate the need for a more comprehensive evaluation.

Screenings are designed to provide detailed information about a child's abilities and needs in a particular domain of development. Certain formal assessments can also be used for diagnostic purposes. Because consistent and accurate information is integral to early intervention/early special education efforts, early childhood educators can offer critical insights and details during the evaluation process. To learn more, see "Authentic and Meaningful Developmental Screening in Early Childhood," by Marisa Macy and Stefano J. Bagnato, in the Fall 2022 issue of *Teaching Young Children*.

Sharing Assessment Information with Families

Observations are rich "moments in time" and can offer families a deeper understanding of what their children do and discover during the day. By sharing these observations during pickup time, in classroom newsletters, or during educator-family conferences, teachers can build trust and connections with the families in their settings.

Families have a right to understand what is being collected about their children, how the information is being used, and in what ways it is being shared with other staff and agencies. Because assessment can be formal or informal, specific to one child or program-wide, educators may struggle with how to meaningfully share the information they gather. Here are some guidelines for discussing data collection (Lin et al. 2016):

- Inform families about the program's assessment practices at enrollment. Explain what information the program collects, why they collect it, and how it may be used.
- Allow families to choose if they want to share personal information. This helps build trust. Programs should also outline the ways they ensure families' privacy and the data protections they have in place (such as confidentiality agreements, data sharing agreements, and secure data storage).

- Highlight the benefits of collecting assessment information. These include determining a child's eligibility for community services; documenting that children are receiving necessary services; illustrating a child's progress and learning across the curriculum; ensuring compliance with funding agencies; and guiding improvements to the program.

Observation and Documentation in Action

The following vignette shows how Gabriella used the three-step process in her infant and toddler classroom.

Gabriella's class struggles with transitions, particularly when toddlers in her room prepare to go outside. She asks her colleague, Isis, to come in and observe during this time of day. Isis sees that some children are zipped up and standing by the door while other children are waiting to be helped into their jackets. By the time children get outside, some are crying, others have unzipped their jackets, and one pushes a peer to get out the door.

At a follow-up meeting with Isis, Gabriella uses the three-step approach of reflection, feedback, and action planning. She *reflects* on her frustration that a seemingly "simple" transition poses such a challenge, then considers the observational data that some children are waiting up to four to five minutes in their jackets and boots by the door.

Gabriella shares her goal for making the transition to the playground smoother for everyone. With Isis' help, Gabriella offers important *feedback* about the children she works with—young toddlers have difficulty waiting, yet they need adult assistance with dressing. Gabriella then focuses on *action planning*: What can be done to ease this transition?

Gabriella and her two coteachers decide to put children's coats on the backs of their chairs during snack time and to line up boots by the playground door. As the first children finish their snack, Gabriella will help them get dressed, and her two coteachers will take them to the playground. One coteacher will stay to supervise outdoor play while the other heads back to the classroom. Gabriella will remain in the room, helping each child put on jacket and boots, while her coteacher leads children to the playground individually or in small groups as they're ready. This approach cuts down children's waiting time, allows for more one-on-one attention, creates opportunities for children to practice early dressing skills, and ultimately meets Gabriella's goal of providing a calmer transition to outdoor play.

Think About It

- Consider when you've used assessment information to make a decision: for example, selecting a route for a road trip based on estimated drive times or keeping track of a child's fever to decide when to give medication.
- Most educators regularly make informal observations of the children in their setting. Think about a time you've used observations to adjust your planning or teaching.

- Reflect on your own teaching practice. Where would you like support in incorporating observational data or assessment results into your practice? What information would provide ongoing insights into your skills and progress toward your goals?

Try It

- As you review assessment information for your setting or practice, take a moment to check in with yourself. Do you have any immediate reactions (pride, satisfaction, insecurity, frustration)? It is normal to have strong feelings about assessment data. Acknowledging our feelings helps us manage them so these reactions don't get in the way of our ability to use and learn from the information.
- Look at data as a snapshot in time and one piece of a larger picture. Consider what other sources of information you may have that can add to this picture. Informal observations, children's work samples, videos, and feedback from families are all examples of other important data sources.
- Use assessment information as a jumping off point for curriculum planning. Experiment with new approaches, activities, or ways of being with children. Invite a colleague to observe you implementing these changes and to offer thoughts on how they're working.
- Share assessment information with families to help them understand planned changes to the environment or your teaching. For example, you might use a weekly newsletter to explain that you've been observing young toddlers stacking objects and knocking them down. Let families know that in the coming weeks, you will introduce different types of blocks and boxes to give children an opportunity to explore this cause-and-effect relationship with a range of materials. Ask them if they've noticed their child engaging in similar cause-and-effect behaviors.

Wrapping Up

While most often informal, teacher and staff observations are an important contribution to effective teaching. Taking the time to understand and apply these findings creates an environment of ongoing reflection and learning—for teachers and children.

Rocking and Rolling is written by infant and toddler specialists and contributed by ZERO TO THREE, a nonprofit organization working to promote the health and development of infants and toddlers by translating research and knowledge into a range of practical tools and resources for use by the adults who influence the lives of young children.

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Audience: *Administrator (director or principal)*, *Student (higher education)*, *Teacher*
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