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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the development of systematic observation procedures, this document provides guidance in choosing methods to assess the development of children within an early childhood program. The document discusses how to use observation data to guide decisions about curriculum and teaching, provide feedback on educational and developmental progress, and indicate whether program goals are being met for individual children and groups of children. It also provides general guidelines for making and using observations and suggestions for developing an observation system. Lists of observable behaviors are presented, including behaviors that demonstrate cognitive, language, social-emotional, and physical development. Guidelines for using these lists are provided, along with samples of observation records. The document concludes with a discussion of standardized tests and a presentation of a detailed list of the possible negative effects of mass standardized testing. It is suggested that there are times when standardized testing can be used appropriately as one component of the assessment process. A list of criteria that standardized tests should meet for use in such situations is included. (MM)

Appropriate Assessment of Young Children

Michigan State Board of Education
Early Childhood Education & Parenting Office

April 1992

This publication was printed using 100% federal funds under P.L. 101-476 to provide early childhood specialists with information on appropriate assessment. 5,000 copies were printed at a cost of $2,498.60 or $0.499 per copy.

To The Reader:

The use of pencil and paper tests to evaluate children's "readiness" for school entry and their progress for grade placement is currently an issue of great concern in Michigan. Such procedures are generally inappropriate for the age and developmental level of young children and tend to develop narrow curricula which focus only on academic or cognitive skills.

In response to this, the Early Childhood Education and Parenting Office of the Michigan Department of Education developed Michigan's guidelines and recommendations for the Appropriate Assessment of Young Children. This effort was aided by a Michigan State Board of Education appointed committee of early childhood experts and parents with diverse backgrounds and experience.

The information presented is research-based and representative of "best practices" in early childhood education. Included are optional approaches for the appropriate assessment of young children which we encourage local school boards, administrators, teachers, parents, and other advocates of young children to consider and use.

Robert E. Schiller
Superintendent of Public Instruction

PREFACE

In June of 1989, the Michigan State Board of Education appointed an evaluation panel for the state-funded preschool programs for four-year-olds "at risk" of school failure. This panel included a broad-based group of persons with expertise in early childhood development, early childhood program evaluation, and evaluation and measurement.

The charge of the panel was to advise and assist Department of Education staff in establishing guidelines and criteria to be used by school, project, and other professional personnel responsible for documenting and reporting the status, progress, and impact of Michigan's state-funded preschool programs. Specific tasks included:

I. Development of a common framework for evaluating the quality of the overall program, including compliance with mandated requirements and implementation of methods, techniques, and approaches supported by research on high quality and effective early childhood programs.

II. Development of specific guidelines and recommendations regarding methods and procedures to be used to assess appropriately the gains and progress of students.

III. Development of a design and criteria for implementing a longitudinal study of students in the state funded preschool program to determine the impact and benefits of participation.

The panel met monthly from July 1989 through January 1990. At the last meeting, a consensus was reached relative to recommendations for each task to be included in the Report of the Evaluation of State-Funded Preschool Programs submitted to the State Board of Education.

The draft report was disseminated to key advocacy groups and organizations for review and comment. All comments received were reviewed and edited by a subcommittee of the panel. A final edited copy of the report was submitted to the State Board of Education. The State Board of Education approved the entire report on April 18, 1990.

This document, Appropriate Assessment of Young Children, is a subsection (Component II) of the above-mentioned report. It was developed by a subcommittee of eight members of the evaluation panel. The ideas presented in this document are intended to provide specific guidelines for methods and procedures to be used in appropriately assessing the growth and development of young children in early childhood education programs. A serious attempt was made to tell not only what should be done, but how to do it as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The State Board of Education is grateful to the following persons who, as members of the Evaluation Panel for State-Funded Preschool Programs, gave willingly of their time and expertise for the development of this document, with the primary goal of improving the quality of early childhood programs.

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APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Introduction

This document is intended to provide guidance in choosing and/or developing methods to assess the development of individual children within a program. The teacher's assessment of the emotional, social, physical, intellectual, aesthetic, language, and sensory functioning of each student is of great importance. Many forms of assessment should be used to measure students' progress in all areas of growth.

The essential purposes of assessment are to do the following:

- Guide decisions about curriculum and teaching.

- Provide feedback on educational and developmental progress.

- Indicate whether or not program goals are being met.

Two major approaches to assessment are observation and testing. The systematic observation of behavior can be incorporated into the ongoing activities in the classroom; at the same time it can incorporate all aspects of development. The behavioral information obtained from observations is accurate, precise, and meaningful to the teacher as it occurs in an authentic context. In addition, observation serves as excellent feedback and allows the teacher to continually modify the classroom environment and program to best meet the students' needs. Ongoing observation is far more cost effective than testing since there is no equipment, release time, or instruction necessary. Observations, when collected and summarized appropriately, provide sufficient information to assess and report children's progress. No additional testing is necessary. However, when standardized tests are used, observation should also take place as it is a necessary component of any assessment process.

Both behavioral observations based on naturally occurring classroom activities and traditional standardized tests are a means of assessing children's growth. The major focus of this paper is the development of systematic observation procedures, including advice as to the behaviors to be monitored. The goal is an optimal assessment of young children's behavior. Attention is also given to the use of standardized tests for the improvement of test selection.

ASSESSING CHILDREN THROUGH OBSERVATION

The most useful procedures for gathering information are those which can be incorporated into the on-going activities in the classroom and which consider all aspects of development. The systematic observations of teachers and other professionals, in addition to information obtained from parents and primary caregivers, are important sources of information.

The data acquired through objective observation can be utilized to plan the curriculum, to devise ways to help children to strengthen particular areas of development, and to plan activities enhancing current developmental strengths. Continuous observation will provide evidence of progress.

This document is based on the assumption that the curriculum allows the opportunity for observing children engaged in developmentally appropriate activities in the daily program. For example, the program should provide children with the opportunity to engage in free play. This includes making choices and using information-gathering techniques such as questioning, experimenting, exploring, and attaching symbolic meaning to real or imaginative objects. Appropriate physical activities which use all muscle groups and activities that require physical and sensory coordination are also important elements of the daily routine for children.

Contrived or artificial situations are neither necessary nor appropriate for observational assessment. A comprehensive early childhood program will provide ample opportunity for observation and assessment of all areas of development. The final pages offer lists of items grouped into the following four categories: Cognitive, Language, Social-Emotional, and Physical Development. These categories may be utilized to analyze or collect observation data about children.

USING OBSERVATION DATA

Observation data can be used alone or can be combined with test scores, evaluations by professionals (such as speech therapists), and informal information (such as parent interviews).

There is a difference between information from standardized tests and the information that can be gleaned from observations. Test results may show only a fraction of a child's knowledge or skill and may or may not have relevance to a child's actual performance in a group setting. Observational data provides a comprehensive record of a child's level of functioning. All testing should be accompanied by observation to increase the validity of assessment efforts.

Professional Considerations

Observation notes, like all other records of the child, should be subject to professional consideration regarding confidentiality and right of access. Care should be exercised in determining the release of information and security measures for records.

Uses for Individual Children

Observations can be used to gather baseline or repeated measures of a child's actual performance. The data can be used as the basis for curriculum planning, to verify or question screening recommendations, and to verify or question previous assessments of the child.

Anecdotal records can also be applied to checklists, eliminating the necessity of administering each item. For example, during free play a child was observed stringing beads and duplicating a pattern pictured on the box lid. Two items on a checklist, one which asks if the child can grasp small objects with thumb and forefinger, and one on the child's ability to reproduce a pattern, will not need to be administered since the information has already been observed and date recorded.

With observational data we can look for patterns of behavior that are useful to teachers in planning and reporting. Summaries of observational data on the child "at-risk," however, should be made with care to avoid misleading or broad generalizations. Reduction of risk in the at-risk child is a long-term process, but data from observations spaced over the school year will show growth or gain during that one-year period.

Uses for Groups of Children

Data from observations of a group of children can be used as the basis for making curriculum and scheduling changes or for altering teaching practices. For example, valuable data can result from using the Time Sampling or Event Sampling approaches to record how the group is disbursed during free choice time, responds to transitions, or when the noise level of the group increases. Such information can be used to critique the daily schedule or decide on the components of the next day's curriculum.

Gains for the children enrolled in a program can be documented by showing improvement in each domain for the majority of children, even if not all children show gains on the same items. For example, all children in a group may show evidence of growth in language skills although not all children will be at the same level.

GUIDELINES FOR OBSERVING

There are many ways to observe and record behavior for the purpose of studying children. Observation approaches fall into two main categories: unfocused and focused. The unfocused approach is very useful for busy teachers. Whatever the child happens to be doing and saying at the moment of observation is recorded. Later the information on the note can be categorized in terms of the child's development. In focused approaches, whether utilizing a check list or a blank piece of paper, the observer decides in advance what to look for. The focus might be specific skills, use of particular materials, language facility, or social interactions.

Regardless of whether the observation is unfocused or focused, and regardless of whether it is a spontaneous or planned period of observation, here are some general guidelines to be followed.

1. Record only what is seen. Valuable observations are those based on fact, not opinion. If the observation is guided by opinion based on previous information or the observer's view of the current event, the observation is a waste of time. The purpose of observation is to gather information providing evidence of the actual level of performance of the child. Only facts will do.

2. Do not interpret as you observe. Interpretations are based on repeated observations and a composite of information. Let the reader (you or someone else) interpret the facts after the information has been recorded. Use words that describe but do not judge or interpret. Avoid using words such as "because," "wanted," or "liked." Write down only what you see. You can't see what an individual is thinking or feeling. You can see smiles, hear comments, and note observed body language.

3. Record detailed facts in order of occurrence. It is useful to include the context in which the behavior occurred. At the same time, make an effort to save writing time by leaving out unnecessary words such as "he did," "then he." Use compact phrases such as "Sat down puzzle table," "Zipped own jacket," "to Jeremy--'I want milk, please'."

4. Write down what is seen as soon as possible. Do not trust your memory. It is more likely that observations will be accurate and objective if recorded immediately. If the information is inaccurate, it has no value.

5. Record the date and time of each note, regardless of its brevity or content. It is useful to add the initials of the observer.

MAKING OBSERVATIONS

Different programs and teachers require different methods of observation. Most teachers will find that a combination of methods works best. The goal should be to gather the most objective and useful information with the least disruption to the teaching process and classroom environment.

Getting Ready

Observations can be written in a number of ways. Effective recording systems include:

a. Index cards. Keep them in your pocket or convenient location. Make a note on a card and move it to the bottom of the stack.

b. Clip board. Keep it in an accessible spot, such as on top of a file cabinet. This may be the preferred system if you are using a checklist or a form for focused observations.

c. A pad of self-stick removable notes. These provide an efficient method since the notes are easily transferred to the inside of a child's folder or your own observation records.

d. Spiral bound or loose-leaf notebook. An advantage of this approach is that notes can be made in several different pages during one observation period. However, it can be time consuming if you have to search for the proper spot in which to record your note. This system may be most useful for notes written after a class.

e. A tape recorder. Place the tape recorder on top of a file cabinet (out of the reach of children) and quietly record observations.

Selecting a Procedure

Unfocused observations are the easiest, and often the best, for use on a daily basis. In the unfocused approach the observer simply makes a note of something interesting about the child regardless of whether it represents social, cognitive, language, or physical development.

Advantages of making unfocused observations include: a) what was observed may fit into several categories of development or behavior and can be evaluated in a variety of ways, and b) a minimum of time is taken away from other responsibilities of the teacher and staff.

The use of unfocused observations eliminates any need for the observer to wait, poised with pencil and pad in hand, for a particular behavior or skill level to be demonstrated by the child. After a number of notes have been recorded and reviewed, a determination can be made whether it is necessary to make more focused observations of the child in order to have a balanced picture of total development. For example, if the recorded observations all deal with social behaviors, focused observations which look at the child's cognitive and physical development should be made next.

Focused observations are the preferred approach for information about one aspect of development, such as language development. The recorded observations would all deal with the child's use of language.

The focused approach is also useful when studying the children's use of materials. For example, the observer might focus on one area of the room, the block area, and all notes would deal with the children's use of the blocks and the social interactions and language during block play.

A number of formats are suitable for focused observations. Two examples are:

1. Checklists. Items are checked off, either as a "yes" or "no" (the child does or does not show evidence of having achieved a certain skill level) or on a scale that permits a wider range of responses (e.g., "not yet," "sometimes," "always," or a numerical rating). Unless notes are made by the observer, the information on such forms may be of limited value in planning for

the child. The reliability of such lists will vary with the skill of the observer. Advantages include the speed with which the data can be gathered and the specificity of the information.

2. Fill in the blank. Observers may design forms that address specific information desired. Example: "Shows curiosity and initiative, tries new activities with confidence" directs the observer to watch for behavior that could be recorded under that item. This approach will assist teachers in acquiring information desired about particular realms of the child's level of functioning. It is more time consuming and awkward to use than if spontaneous notes are made about the child's behavior, with the notes reviewed later and fit into categories.

DEVELOPING A SYSTEM THAT WORKS.

It is essential that observation be a systematic, integral part of the on-going teaching process, whether a focused or unfocused approach is used and regardless of the format utilized for recording.

To achieve success in assessing children through observation, the teacher should:

1. Observe and record information each day. Make the gathering of information part of the regular teaching process and part of the staff daily routine. There may be time for only a brief note on one child one day; but on another day there will be time to record a significant amount of information on several children.

2. Be systematic about what is observed. Specific goals for the procedures to be used and determining which children are to be observed will increase the likelihood of obtaining useful information.

   Suggestions:

   a) Decide in advance which children to observe for each day. The class list, with its alphabetical listing, provides order and is a convenient reference of which children have been observed. Progress down the class list, observing one to three children each day, and then return to the top of the list. Even if you must miss recording on a day or two, each three-week period should result in a valuable file with some information on each child in the class. When repeated throughout the year, this procedure yields a wealth of information documenting the children's growth.

   b) Fit the observing and recording into the daily classroom routine. The spontaneous recording of anything that occurs is easiest, but may not always fulfill your needs. When gathering information on specific children, try looking at the children at regular time intervals throughout the day. For example, every ten minutes record whatever the children being observed are doing at that moment. This is called Time Sampling and provides more objective data on children than if children are observed only when attracting the attention of an adult for some reason.

Another procedure is called Event Sampling. Make a note whenever the target child engages in a behavior that needs assessment. For example, if information is needed on gross motor development, record observations of the child running, climbing, balancing, etc.

3. Develop an efficient, accurate way of writing down what is seen. Use abbreviations if they are clear to you and others who may read the notes. Do not write more words than necessary. Phrases or incomplete sentences are often sufficient to convey the information.

The primary purpose of assessment is to improve the program for the individual child. It may be useful to focus on an area in which the child displays some weakness, such as cooperative interaction with peers. Follow up the observations by providing opportunities for the child to further develop that skill. However, note the strengths of each child also, providing equally valuable information that can be used for planning to enhance development.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The following provides a listing of some aspects of development that can be observed in the classroom. These lists provide the teacher with developmentally appropriate items to study when assessing young children. The lists may be used alone or in conjunction with other assessment procedures to document children's level of functioning and change over time. It is not necessary to follow the lists when observing children, but rather the lists may serve as a vehicle for categorizing observations made of children in the classroom. The behavioral examples are grouped into four categories of development: Cognitive, Language, Social-Emotional, and Physical. Items related to aesthetic and sensory development are included in these broad categories.

Guidelines for the use of the lists of observational behaviors are on page 12, followed by some examples of observation records.

I. COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Components include constructing numerical, spatial, and temporal relationships; exploring, interpreting, and representing the world; and use of problem-solving strategies.

Record specific observed behavior of the child that documents the child's current level of functioning. EXAMPLES:

a. using information-gathering techniques, such as questioning, experimenting, observing, and consulting

b. learning about the attributes of objects, such as size, shape, and hardness

c. recognizing or constructing relationships among objects and events via the process of classification (grouping according to perceived similarities and differences) or patterning (recognition or duplication of patterns)

d. exploring and utilizing a variety of objects and materials related to the expressi e arts (various art media, rhythm instruments, songs, and movement)

e. constructing a concept of number invariants (conservation and one-to-one correspondence) and associating a number of objects with the numeral name;

f. constructing a concept of quantity (same, more, less) and a concept of measurement (longer, larger)

g. developing a concept of time (use and understanding of yesterday, tomorrow, present, and future)

h. using problem-solving strategies in activities such as matching games, puzzles, and building with blocks

i. attaching meaning to symbols in the environment, such as the child's own printed name, stop sign, etc.

j. assigning symbolic meaning to real or imaginary objects in spontaneous pretend play

k. experimenting with a variety of roles (leader, follower, mediator) and characterizations (animals, mother, astronaut, etc.)

l. interpreting experiences through playing, speaking, movement, drawing, and inventive writing

II. LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Components include receptive and expressive language; expanding ability to communicate for a variety of purposes; and understanding different forms of communication.

Record specific observed behavior of the child that documents the child's current level of functioning. EXAMPLES:

a. processing auditory signals such as sounds (clean-up music, fire alarm, unexpected noises) and spoken words (urgent requests and greetings)

b. extracting and interpreting relevant content from auditory verbal information presented to them (understanding directions and requests)

c. speaking clearly enough to be understood by others

d. expanding the ability to present ideas to others coherently

e. using verbal expressions to communicate needs to peers and adults

f. engaging in spontaneous conversation with peers and adults

g. expanding the ability to use words to represent knowledge, events, ideas, imagination, and perceptions

h. using sentences and sentence combinations to express feelings, ideas, and experiences

i. seeking out literary experiences, such as looking for books, asking that a story be read, and wanting to "write"

j. understanding correspondence between spoken and written language

k. showing increased awareness of an ability to interpret non-verbal cues (gestures, facial expressions, and body language)

III. SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Components include developing self-awareness, self-esteem, self-control, a sense of belonging, curiosity, initiative, and building positive relationships with peers and adults.

Record specific observed behavior of the child that documents the child's current level of functioning. EXAMPLES:

Self

a. valuing her/his own gender, culture, and race

b. showing curiosity and initiative, trying new activities with confidence

c. taking care of physical and self-care needs with a minimum of help

d. making choices and accepting the consequences of personal decision

e. being able to independently begin and pursue a task

f. demonstrating the belief that school is safe, predictable, interesting, and enjoyable

Social Competence

g. developing play skills (how to join a group at play, how to make suggestions, how to take suggestions, and learning ways to deal with unpleasant situations and the feelings associated with them)

h. developing friendship skills (how to initiate, maintain, and terminate interactions and relationships)

i. learning how to conform to reasonable limits set upon behavior, play space, use of materials, or the types of activities in which they are involved

j. learning to settle disagreements with peers verbally

k. relating positively to adults (asking for help, seeking approval, without being overly dependent)

l. developing the ability to interact cooperatively with others

m. developing awareness and concern for the rights and well-being of others

IV. PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Components include maintaining a desirable level of health and fitness, becoming more competent in body management, and acquiring basic physical skills, both gross motor and fine motor.

Record specific observed behavior of the child that documents the child's current level of functioning. EXAMPLES:

Health and Fitness

a. using her/his whole body in appropriate activities to strengthen muscles and muscle groups

b. sustaining a vigorous motor activity over time to develop endurance

c. developing a positive attitude about her/his body

d. developing good health and safety practices

Body Management

e. developing spatial awareness (understanding of personal and general space, and direction)

f. showing confidence in using her/his body

g. developing awareness of the location of her/his own body parts

h. controlling the movement of her/his body in relation to objects

Physical Skills

i. engaging in a variety of activities that require balance

j. engaging in activities that require coordinated movements

k. engaging in motor activities that require agility and physical flexibility

l. developing fundamental motor skills such as jumping, hopping, throwing, kicking, striking, running, or catching

m. coordinating finger, finger-thumb, and eye-hand movement

n. holding such items as crayons, paint brushes, scissors, and hammers appropriately and controlling items with appropriate movements

o. making progress in self-help skills (e.g., dressing and pouring)

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE LISTS OF OBSERVABLE BEHAVIORS

1. Use all of the items listed for classroom observations. Teachers should look for each item, even if it is not possible to use the entire list for each individual child. All of the items reflect developmentally appropriate expectations for young children. It is not expected that all children will display mastery of all items.

2. Do not attempt to use all of the items for every child in the class. It would be extremely complex and time-consuming to gather observed information on each item for each child in a classroom. A sampling of items should provide a general picture of a child's present level of functioning.

3. For each child, gather information that represents a range of items in the categories. When recording for the Cognitive Development category, for example, gather information on each child for at least four of the twelve items listed. Do not use the same four items for all children. Use all twelve items for your class as a whole.

4. In repeated observations of a child, record information on at least one previously observed item under each category. If a previously recorded observation dealt with the child's ability to classify or duplicate a pattern, for example, make another observation of that item in order to document current level of functioning.

5. Do not record the same items for every child in the class during a short period of time. Focusing on a few items will give a distorted picture of both the curriculum and the overall development of the children in the class. All of the items on the list are important and worthy of observing.

6. Adhere to the Guidelines for objective observation. Record only what is seen and avoid inference or judgment. Remember that information which is influenced by prior impressions and based on opinion or inference is not valuable. Only facts that are objectively observed should be recorded.

SAMPLE RECORDING SYSTEMS FOR USING OBSERVATIONS

There are numerous ways in which observation notes can be used in conjunction with the lists of behavioral items and incorporated into a teacher's records or a child's folder. The examples given here follow the practice of including date and time of the observation and the initials or name of observer in the notes.

Example #1

Child: John Jones Date: 1-17-90 Time: 10:22 Observer: M. Smith Holding tape recorder and toy microphone. "Teacher, this thing will not work." Teacher gestured to come over. Walked to her, watched and listened to her instructions for use. Walked to table. Talked into microphone; replayed and listened.

These notes could be coded for numerous items including:

I. a. using information-gathering techniques such as questioning, experimenting, observing, and consulting (reported problem with toy to teacher)

II. c. speaking clearly enough to be understood by others (teacher understood his request)

II. b. extracting and interpreting relevant content from auditory verbal information presented (followed teacher's instructions)

III. k. relating positively to adults (sought help from teacher, responded to her gesture to come close, attended to teacher's explanation, and played independently)

The following are examples of how the above observation might be entered into a child's record.

1. Informal, anecdotal notes can be labeled according to the categories. The itemizing could be accomplished by putting one or more of the item numbers (I.a.; II.c.; II.b.; III.k.) in front of the item where it is recorded in the child's folder.

Sample record:

Child: John Jones Date: 1-17-90 Observer: MS 10:22

Holding tape recorder and toy microphone.

I. a. "Teacher, this thing will not work." Teacher
II. c. gestured to come over. Walked to her,
II. b. watched and listened to her instructions for use
III. k. Walked to table. Talked into microphone; replayed and listened.

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2. Each child's record can be divided into categories and the item recorded under that category.

Sample record:

Child: John Jones

II. Language Development

1-17-90 10:22 a.m. (MS)
Holding tape recorder and toy microphone. "Teacher, this thing will not work." Teacher gestured to come over. Walked to her, watched and listened to her instructions for use. Walked to table. Talked into microphone; replayed and listened.

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3. Forms may be utilized that include spaces for the category notes and comments.

Sample record:

Category	Observed	Date/0B.S.	Comments
I. a.	Holding tape recorder and toy microphone. "Teacher, this thing will not work." Teacher gestured to come over. Walked to teacher, watched and listened to her instructions. Walked to table. Talked into microphone; replayed and listened.	1/17/90 10:22 MS	Sought Help and Followed Instructions; Played Independently

The examples below all follow the first recording approach: labeling informal, anecdotal records according to the behavioral items listed.

Example #2

Child: Tanya Tate Date: 2/14/90 Time: 9:35 Observer: Mary Smith
At a small manipulative table. Stacking square rods. Makes several vertical structures with the rods. Makes large T-shaped structure. It falls. Puts rods in their box, goes to easel. Walks up, picks up brown marker, makes a vertical rectangle which nearly covers the paper,

then a small "window" toward the top. Paper comes loose. Can't reach clip and hold paper. Asks Mrs. B. for help. Mrs. B. clips paper. T. smiles, resumes drawing.

The various items this observation could be coded for include:

III. b. showing curiosity and initiative, trying new activities with confidence (walked right up to easel, started drawing)

III. e. being able to independently begin and pursue a task (worked independently both at table and at easel, asked for help only to clip paper which was too high for her to reach)

While this example does not show that Tanya explored a variety of media, this note in her folder could be reviewed along with previous notes to see if it would be suitable to include item I.d.: exploring and utilizing a variety of objects and materials related to the expressive arts (various art media, rhythm instruments, songs, and movement). If previous notes refer to the use of other media, then the item would be appropriate to include at this time. If not, then this note may be useful when subsequent notes deal with other aspects of the arts.

Since no mention is made in the notes of the way in which Tanya handled the marker, it would not be appropriate to include item IV.n. (holding such items as crayons, paint brushes, scissors, and hammers appropriately and controlling with appropriate movements) without further documentation.

Likewise, there is insufficient evidence to include item III.i. (learning how to conform to reasonable limits set upon behavior, play space, use of materials, or the types of activities in which they are involved); but the fact that Tanya put the rods back into their box before going on to the next activity can be useful when scanning notes for evidence that she understands and follows the rules for use of materials.

It is important to include only information that is clear from the notes. For example, there is no indication that Tanya identified part of her drawing as a window, nor is there clear indication that it was supposed to be anything in particular. However, if it had been noted that Tanya told Mrs. B. that she was drawing a house, and elaborated on who lived in the house, then we could also include item I.l. (interpreting experiences through playing, speaking, movement, drawing, or inventive writing).

Example #3

Date: 3/17/90 Time: 10: 10 Observer: Mary S. Housekeeping area.
Michael sitting at table. Matt looking in frig. Michael: "I want some milk please."; held cup out. Matt "poured milk" for him, using imaginary pitcher from frig.

This note could be entered into both Michael's and Matt's folders and coded for item I.j. (assigning symbolic meaning to real or imaginary objects in spontaneous pretend play).

The note could be useful for assessing social skills of the boys, such as III.m. (developing the ability to interact cooperatively with others), although this note alone is not sufficient evidence for making assumptions about either boy's current level of functioning. Coupled with other observations, it helps to provide a picture. Another note on one of the boys made that same morning might indicate that he was unable to interact cooperatively with a peer in a different situation, highlighting the pitfalls of making judgments based on limited information. In order to make an objective assessment of their current level of functioning, it is extremely important to note the strengths and successes of children as well as those behaviors that indicate a need for growth.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

Standardized tests are "instruments composed of empirically selected items that have definite instructions for use, adequately determined norms, and data on reliability and validity." Currently, three basic types of standardized tests are used with young children. The first type is a group-administered, paper and pencil test that focuses on cognitive development. The Metropolitan and California Achievement Tests are examples of this type of test. The second type is an individually administered assessment that uses concrete manipulatives to evaluate cognitive and motor performance outside of the classroom setting. The Chicago EARLY and DIAL-R are examples of this type of test. The third type is an individual or group-administered checklist that utilizes children's actions in the classroom in naturally occurring or contrived situations across a range of behavioral domains. The Brigance is an example of this type. Typically, standardized tests are used to assess children at only two points in time: at the beginning and end of the program.

Many district-developed assessments are similar in structure and content to one of the three types of standardized tests. These tests, however, are not empirically derived, normed, or tested.

It is increasingly apparent that mass standardized testing of young children may be harmful. Standardized testing:

1. often narrows the curriculum. Teachers inevitably teach to the test. Many of the important dispositions that children need to develop in early childhood, such as self-esteem, social competence, desire to learn, and self-discipline, are not easily measured by standardized tests. As a result, social, emotional, moral, and physical development may be given minor importance in schools with mandated testing programs.

2. often ignores higher level thinking processes. Where test scores are stressed, often the curriculum is designed to ensure that children memorize facts and figures that can be easily addressed by a test. More challenging intellectual pursuits, such as understanding stories, problem solving, and creative thinking, are given less emphasis. These abilities will become important in the future. Children need to learn how to learn so that they are prepared to function in an ever-changing society.

3. puts undue stress on young children. The potential psychological harm of testing children when they are adjusting to new people and unfamiliar surroundings is well documented.

4. is inaccurate without reliable, valid instruments. There are few such instruments for use with young children. In the absence of valid instruments, results are questionable.

5. results are influenced by young children's test-taking skills. The younger the child, the more difficult it is to obtain reliable (consistent over time) and valid (accurate) results from tests. Behaviors such as the ability to sit down, be quiet, and make a mark in the correct place do not necessarily reflect children's level of learning.

6. is rarely culture-free. Test developers often ignore language and cultural variations. Any test in English given to non-native English speakers, or children who speak a dialect of English, is first and foremost a language test, regardless of its intent.

7. frequently drains resources of time and funds. Testing (and preparing for it) requires days and dollars that could be better utilized.

8. provides results that are often used inappropriately. It is wrong to use single test scores for decisions that have a major impact on children. Other relevant information, particularly observations by parents and teachers, should also be considered.

Keeping the preceding concerns regarding standardized testing in mind, there are some select times when standardized testing can be used appropriately as one component of the assessment process. Standardized test scores may serve, for example, as a baseline measure for longitudinal research: when standardized tests are used for program evaluation or accountability, it is permissible to test only a random sample of the children large enough to insure general results. In order to minimize the limitations described above, tests must meet particular criteria. Standardized tests should:

1. be designed to be individually administered. An assessment instrument that has been designed and normed for large group administration is not appropriate.

2. require child responses to be mainly motoric, verbal, or require responses to auditory stimuli (e.g., pointing, constructing, sorting; naming an object or picture, answering a question; following directions, discriminating among sounds). Concrete materials and pictures should be the main media for obtaining responses. Paper and pencil should be used only as a check of perceptual-motor functioning (e.g., copy a shape, write his/her name).

3. be broad in scope. Developmental domains should include emotional, social, physical, intellectual, aesthetic, language, and sensory functioning.

4. be brief. Testing should take a maximum of twenty-five minutes.

5. be administered by an adult known to the child.

6. provide useful information for curriculum planning.

7. be normed on a large representative sample of children.

8. be statistically valid and reliable.

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