

About assessment



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Assessment and evaluation are part of an ongoing cycle that includes observing, documenting, analysing, planning, implementing and critical reflection. (EYLF, p 25)

Educators sometimes shy away from assessment, usually because they are not sure what it involves, or fear that it is very prescriptive and just about ticking boxes. Assessment, however, is certainly not about testing children or filling in checklists. Instead, it is an essential part of the planning cycle. Without assessment, you cannot make full use of the information you have gleaned through your documentation, review and reflections, along with your interactions with the children and their families.

Assessment and learning

The EYLF demonstrates that assessment is about “assessment for learning” and “assessment as learning” as well as “assessment of learning” (see p 25).

Assessment is about documenting and celebrating children’s learning so you know that they are making progress. You can use this documentation to reflect all five Learning Outcomes. The process involves:

- ✦ **gathering information** through documenting children’s learning, development and wellbeing

- ✦ **using information** to include and support children in their learning, development and wellbeing through planning, review and reflection
- ✦ **summarising information** to share with children, families and other educators so they can add their views
- ✦ **using summary information** to support children’s progress and report on it to other educators and professionals.

The first two activities in this process describe informal assessment that is taking place all the time. The last two address elements of more formal or summative assessments.

The purpose of **assessment for learning** is to provide feedback to children, and to other educators and to families who are working together to improve knowledge and understanding and move learning forward. With **assessment of learning**, you aim to determine the overall effectiveness of your planned program, and whether it has achieved its aims for each child or group of children. As to the third type of assessment:

Assessment ‘as learning’ is used to facilitate children’s awareness, contributions and appreciation of their own learning. (EYLF, p 25)



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Overview of forms of assessment

This section gives an overview of specific forms of assessment before we move on to examine these forms and some aspects of assessment in more detail.

Assessment for learning (formative assessment) is a process that builds a bridge between children's learning and intentional teaching. Through scaffolding and providing feedback, educators enable learners to move forward, and this process activates children as 'owners' of their learning. This form of assessment takes place while children are learning – not before and not afterwards (Wiliam 2010).

Assessment of learning (summative assessment) is usually an opportunity to provide a summary of the learning children have reached during their time with you. An obvious example is the "Transition: A Positive Start to School" statements that early childhood educators and families in Victoria prepare as their children leave the setting and move on to school. These transition statements give summary information about each child and their achievement in moving towards the five Learning Outcomes to date (DEECD 2009).

During **assessment as learning** (dynamic assessment), the educator actively engages the learner in learning. In interactions between you and the child, you mediate the world for the child by framing, selecting, focusing and feeding back environmental experiences in a way that produces appropriate learning sets and dispositions (Fleer and Richardson 2004).

Continuous assessment sees assessment as part of everyday practice. As you work alongside the children, asking questions and engaging with them to consider options about their activities, you can develop children's awareness of their own learning and what they need to think about further.

Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning (formative assessment) is about the processes of documenting children's learning over time. You will gather evidence from a range of elements including photographs, videos and samples of the children's work, such as paintings and mark-making. Part of this evidence will be your notes of children's own views about their learning, which you will gain while they review the contents of their own folders or portfolios with you.



Assessment for learning is about monitoring children over a period of time.

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By collecting evidence about children's learning and other relevant materials, you can build up a story of the progress of their individual journeys that includes their voice. It is a story that continually changes and evolves with each little twist and turn. It never ends, and you can never be exactly sure what is going to happen next.

When educators work with children, when they play and experiment and talk with them, when they watch them and everything they do, they are witnessing a fascinating and inspiring process: they are seeing them learn. (Drummond 2003, p 13)

Assessment of learning

As a more formal kind of assessment, assessment of learning (summative assessment) is about looking at all your informal assessments gathered over a period of time, reflecting on them and identifying what they tell you about each child in terms of what they have achieved and where they might go to next.

This more formal assessment enables you to see how children have progressed. You might see whether there is a particular area of learning, development or wellbeing where they are moving at a faster pace or an area where perhaps some appear to have stagnated in their learning journey. You can also see if you have any gaps in your documentation.

You should make these decisions about the child's progress using the Learning Outcomes key components (EYLF, pp 29–63) as benchmarks.

Just as you would with your documentation, you need to conduct more formal assessments objectively and from a position of inquiry, actively seeking to make discoveries about the children from a range of sources. The accuracy and validity of these assessments very much depend on the quality and variety of the documentation you have collected about the children. The broader the picture that you have built up over time, the more effective the assessment will be in helping to determine where each child may progress next.

To log a more formal or summative assessment, you can use an assessment sheet or an individual plan that incorporates the five Learning Outcomes. Your documentation will provide the evidence to identify achievement of the Learning Outcomes. This

information can guide you in terms of where children can go next and the support you can offer. You can develop these objectives alongside families when it's possible to identify similar activities that the child can do at home.

As part of this process, you need to ask yourself about the children in your group, and discuss with colleagues how information you are gathering correlates with that collected by others and how you can then use this to support the children's learning, development and wellbeing. You need to think about:

- ✦ how to extend children's language, vocabulary and thinking in relation to what they are learning
- ✦ how you can support their ability to foster relationships
- ✦ how you can respond to what has been documented, and extend learning, development and wellbeing in all five Learning Outcomes, or perhaps ask if achieving one Learning Outcome needs more support or attention than achieving another does.

Assessment is an ongoing process of using observations or evidence to make judgements about children's learning and the pedagogy of educators. In this process, educators interpret children's learning against Learning Outcomes for the purpose of planning for further learning.



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You need to conduct an assessment of learning from a position of inquiry.

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Assessment as learning

Including children in the process of assessment is a positive means of involving them in their own understandings as their learning, development and wellbeing continue to evolve and progress. Children can contribute to their understanding of the assessment process in a number of ways.

Portfolios

One way to support and involve children in reflecting on their learning is to use portfolios – collections of each child’s artwork, photos of their experiences, documented conversations, and reflections from educators and the child. Originally such portfolios became a history of the year’s experiences to share with families and continuing professionals – essentially a record of achievements throughout the year. A more valuable alternative use of them, however, is to engage each child in their own assessment by actively involving them in activities related to their portfolio.

Discuss with children what they want included in their portfolio and ask them why. Also you can view elements of the portfolio together, comparing

previous selections with the latest additions. Invite each child to review their artwork, as well as records of their building activities and physical actions, and to describe how they have changed over time. Including children in the development and review of their portfolio contents can give them a sense of pride and ownership and expand the range of interpretations available of their learning, development and wellbeing.

Yilmaz and colleagues (2021) explore a theoretical framework that provides some conceptual insights into children’s agency in the learning and assessment process through the use of portfolios. In reviewing and reflecting on portfolios with each child, we encourage their agency by giving them a voice in the forward decision-making process, along with ownership of their progress. This shift in assessment to include children sees you becoming more respectful and responsive, and more reflective about children’s progress.

A portfolio assessment involves deliberately or purposefully collecting the products of a child’s play and work that demonstrates their strengths, progress and achievements (Nolan and Reynolds 2008).

This form of assessment:

- ✦ provides a rich portrait of what children know and are able to do
- ✦ depicts the processes children use when they work and play in a natural environment
- ✦ serves as a source of continuous information about children’s work and play in order to illustrate learning
- ✦ gives feedback and plans interventions
- ✦ aligns assessment with the goals of the Learning Outcomes
- ✦ links assessment with further planning.

Some provisos do apply to portfolio assessment.

When using portfolios, keep in mind these questions:

- ✦ Are the contents of each portfolio representative of the child’s learning?
- ✦ Do you clearly understand the criteria for selecting the contents of the portfolio with each child?
- ✦ Do you involve the child in reviewing, reflecting on and evaluating the contents?
- ✦ Who owns the portfolio?

Floorbooks

Another approach focuses on floorbooks, so called because they are kept on the floor so children can access them easily (Warden 2015, 2021). These large scrapbooks contain blank pages for children to record different aspects of their learning and are a way of organising and collating children's activities and thinking. Floorbooks offer children a shared experience as they gather round to glue in pictures and photographs of their achievements. You can also add notes about the children's conversations.

Children develop and review a floorbook, while you ask questions and invite different views about what the children find interesting at a particular moment. By beginning with what children already know, you can ask further questions and use the floorbook to record answers and review previous conclusions. Floorbooks therefore offer a balance between intentional teaching and child autonomy, giving the children ownership of the context and the content of the experiences recorded for later discussion. Careful viewing of children's floorbooks and the surrounding activities gives you insight into children's patterns of behaviour and thinking. In this way, floorbooks make learning visible.

Assessing strengths and capabilities

To assess young children's strengths, capabilities and learning, use assessment methods that are culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily experiences, supported by research and evidence, inclusive of families and connected to specific purposes. Your guidance in this task comes from the Principles and Practices in the EYLF (pp 14–26). This will support you and your colleagues in:

- ✦ **making sound decisions** about intentional teaching and children's learning, development and wellbeing
- ✦ **identifying specific concerns** that may require focused intervention for individual children
- ✦ **making the best use of programs** to advance your intentions for children's learning, development and wellbeing.

The main influences on children's learning, development and wellbeing are their experiences, their interactions with others, and the expectations that you, their families and communities have of them.

In this multidimensional approach to assessment through documentation and planning, you need to pay attention to:

- ✦ the **physical** setting – the current environment and the organisational setting
- ✦ the **human** setting – the children you are monitoring
- ✦ the **interactional** setting – the variety of interactions taking place
- ✦ the **program** setting – such as the resources, pedagogic styles, and experiences.

Educators tend to monitor children frequently when they are at play, yet play happens so quickly that recording it can be challenging. A digital camera or touch screen is very useful for capturing these telling moments.

Play is rich with meaning, but these meanings remain undiscovered unless as educators we devote time to observe, document and interpret the meaning inherent in children's play.

Drummond (2003) has defined assessment as all the ways in which, as educators in our everyday practice, we monitor children's learning, development and wellbeing, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use. In addition, discussions with children provide a new dimension to our understandings that may, at times, challenge our plans for moving forward.



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