

What is assessment in early childhood education?

Assessment can be defined as “the ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children’s learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use” (Drummond, 1993, p. 13). Assessment in early childhood education (ECE) plays an important role in supporting positive outcomes for children by informing what is taught and how. Research shows that ECE that uses culturally responsive teaching and effective and appropriate assessment is an important contributing factor to children’s success in future learning and education.

Assessment in ECE serves multiple purposes, including:

- enhancing children’s learning and development, through giving feedback, and by extending their knowledge, skills and achievements
- documenting the learning that has occurred and creating summative accounts of progress
- evaluating and improving pedagogies and practices, and the programme
- analysing and improving the physical environment
- appraising and improving interactions between teachers and children, and children and children
- enhancing relationships with families and whānau
- identifying children who need additional support.

Usually assessment should be formative – used to influence learning in the immediate future. However, summative accounts – informing children, families and others about children’s learning and progress over time – can be useful for transition processes.

Formative assessment can be formal or informal. **Informal assessment** occurs in the moment as teachers observe, listen and participate in experiences with children. It informs teachers’ responses, in terms of their actions or changes, and helps children reach immediate and long-term goals. **Formal assessment** involves recording observations for further analysis and reflection, as well as to create a record over time. It enables teachers to identify changes in children’s interests and capabilities, and consider longer-term plans and strategies to support these. Both formal and informal observations and assessments are used to plan programmes and activities that allow children to develop their interests in a child-initiated context.

Kei Tua o te Pae and **Te Whatu Pōkeka** are assessment frameworks consistent with the ECE curriculum document **Te Whāriki**.

Principles for assessment in early childhood

Te Whāriki offers clarification on the purposes and strategies for assessment in early childhood. It recommends a strong focus on formative feedback, as well as alignment with the four principles that underpin the curriculum document. This means assessment should:

- **enhance the mana of the child, and the child’s sense of him or herself as a capable person and competent learner** (**Empowerment / Mana Atua principle**)

Teachers need to recognise children’s individual strengths and abilities, and notice and respond to their initiatives.

- **take account of the whole child and reflect the holistic way in which children learn, based on the context of children’s activities and relationships** (**Holistic development / Kotahitanga principle**)

Teachers need to draw on their wide knowledge of each child when interpreting, and invite families to contribute knowledge of children’s capabilities at home and in other settings. As learning is influenced by the environment and by relationships between children and teachers, these should be recognised.

- **include families and whānau (*Family and Community / Whānau Tangata principle*)**

Assessment should be a social practice where teachers, children, parents and whānau engage together in assessment and the planning based on it. Te Whāriki suggests that assessment takes place within a learning community that co-analyses children's activity, and co-constructs goals. Rather than the one-way relations in which teachers report progress and learning to families and children, this involves the sharing of power to make assessment and planning decisions.

- **recognise the people, places and things that support children's learning (*Relationships / Ngā Hohonga principle*)**

Children's learning should be assessed in context, and reflective of the social contexts in which children are learning. It will involve giving meaningful descriptions of the environment and the people and objects in it that influence learning, and taking account of the children's cultural contexts.

Development of capabilities in early childhood is often unpredictable and fluctuating, and children's ability and development is entwined with their relationships with people, places and things. Therefore, assessment in ECE should focus on multiple interpretations of children's learning, rather than a singular and objective truth about their capabilities.

ECE teachers play an important role in documenting children's knowledge and activity in photos, recordings, and written accounts to be analysed, scrutinised and reflected upon. This means that 'epistemically responsible assessment' (where teachers carefully consider why they choose to assess what they do, how they make judgements, how they know, and what they do with what they know) is important. Teachers should recognise their personal contexts, histories and cultures that influence their interpretations of, and plans for, learning, and be open to alternative perspectives and vocabularies for describing learning that might open up their thinking around children's learning.

What to assess

In early childhood, a credit-based approach to assessment is recommended. This is because progress in learning develops when attention is paid to children's strengths, interests and dispositions. The aim is to use assessment to recognise and build upon existing behaviours in a wider and deeper range of contexts. These means focusing on children's developing knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions as related to *Te Whāriki's* strands and learning outcomes, with a particular focus on **positive learning dispositions** such as courage, curiosity, trust, playfulness, perseverance, confidence and responsibility. Also important are the dispositional behaviours that children display for approaching learning; for example: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty and uncertainty, taking risks, asking for help, expressing a point of view or sharing knowledge. The acquisition of skills and knowledge provide the context for practising the deeper learning associated with dispositions. Remember that what is assessed is what is valued, by teachers, families, and learners themselves.

Dispositions are considered very important for early childhood learning skills. Dispositions describe being ready and willing to learn. For example, there is a big difference between being able to read and being disposed to read (being ready and willing and having the disposition to be a reader). Positive learning dispositions are essential to the cultivation of effective learning skills.

As children approach transition to school, a greater emphasis on literacy and mathematical concepts, and self-management skills can be useful.

Assessment products might include:

- annotated photographs
- children's drawings and art
- recordings or transcripts of conversations
- observations such as running records of children's activities during a session
- learning stories
- learning notes
- children's own photographs and children's dictations

What approach to use

Learning Stories are the most established form of assessment for ECE, backed by the Ministry of Education, ERO and academic research, and most readily incorporate the principles of assessment outlined above. Recently some alternatives (such as Learning Notes) have been proposed, although these are yet to be evaluated. An ECE service may choose to use a mixture of approaches.

References

Drummond, 1993, p. 13