

What is assessment in early childhood education?



ECE resources

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’¹. Assessment in ECE plays an important role in supporting positive outcomes for children by informing what is taught and how. Research shows that effective and appropriate assessment in ECE 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 by giving feedback and enabling teachers to extend 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 teacher-child and peer interactions
- 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, and 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 / Whakamana principle)**

This means 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)**

This means 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)**

This means children's learning should be assessed in context, and assessment documentation should reflect 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, as well as taking account of the children's cultural contexts.

The socially constructed nature of learning and assessment

ECE teachers play an important role in documenting children's knowledge and activity in photos, recordings, and written accounts which can then 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, rather than attempt to provide a singular and objective truth about their capabilities. Multiple interpretations of children's learning can also better reflect the way in which the development of capabilities in early childhood is often unpredictable and fluctuating, and entwined with children's social contexts and relationships.

What to assess

Having a shared sense of what learning matters, or local priorities for curriculum, forms the very first step of an intentional approach to assessment and teaching. Local curriculum refers to determining your priorities and foci for learning according to your own context and shared values. Many settings choose to focus on belonging, social and emotional competence, communication, literacy and numeracy, culture and identity, or place-based learning and concepts such as sustainability as learning priorities, among others. Local curriculum is also about being responsive to what is currently important to you and your families. For example, an early childhood setting might focus on the curriculum area of communication in response to increasing diversity amongst families attending.

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. This 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. **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.

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. As children approach transition to school, a greater emphasis on literacy and mathematical concepts, and self-management skills can be useful. Remember that what is assessed reflects what is valued, by teachers, families, and learners themselves.

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 dictations

What approach to use

[Learning stories](#) are the most established form of assessment for ECE. They are 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.

Further reading

Arndt, S., & Tesar, M. (2015). Early childhood assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand: Critical perspectives and fresh openings. *Journal of Pedagogy*, 6(2), 71-86. doi: 10.1515/jped-2015-0014

Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning Stories*. London: Paul Chapman

Drummond, M. J. (1993). *Assessing children's learning*. London: David Fulton.

Murphy, S. (2013). Towards knowing well and doing well: Assessment and early childhood education. In J. Larson & J. Marsh (Eds.) The SAGE handbook of early childhood literacy (pp.561-574). London: Sage.

Endnotes

1 Drummond (1993), p. 13.

PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY



Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.