

Authentic Assessment Practice Guide

“Ten Big Ideas for Implementing Authentic Assessment Practices”

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Authentic assessment is a promising approach used to chronicle children’s learning and development. The foundation for assessment should be to measure skills that reflect what the child is capable of doing in a real world context. The word “authentic” refers to opportunities created for children that reflect typical experiences, rather than discrete isolated tasks that are irrelevant to the child’s daily life. Authentic assessment creates linkages between assessment and programmatic efforts. When we observe young children participating in authentic activities, we are observing the way they interact with people and their environment in ways that are useful and meaningful to them (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2005). An authentic assessment process involves children performing activities that are meaningful and functional in their everyday environments with familiar people. Ten big ideas are presented to frame the implementation of authentic assessment practice (Bagnato, 2007).

#1. Share assessment responsibilities with a team.

Authentic assessment relies upon a team of people to collect information about children across various settings and to progress monitor skills over time. The team consists of informed caregivers such as parents, grandparents, and other family members, as well as teachers, speech therapists, and other professionals who are familiar with and have knowledge of the child’s skills and abilities. Effective teams are characterized by mutual trust and respect for one another’s roles and expertise, ability to communicate with others, and openness to share typical assessment role responsibilities.

Assessment responsibilities are shared when parents are considered central members of the team with valuable observations and information to share regarding their child’s skills and

developmental. Similarly, assessment responsibilities are shared when teachers and childcare providers provide input in the data gathering process. Assessment responsibilities are also shared when the team relies upon the observations and evaluations of trained professionals such as occupational and speech therapists depending on the child's need.

#2. Conduct assessment over time.

Information collected across time will provide a holistic picture of the child. All too often, judgments are made about children based on limited exposure such as a snapshot test conducted within a narrow window of time when the child may or may not be performing in a typical manner. To determine the degree to which a child possesses a skill or behavior, monitor child performance on an ongoing basis. It may take several sessions or days to observe child performance but the evidence that can be obtained over time will help identify if the target skill is emerging, used some of the time, or the child has mastered the skill by the robust evidence collected through observation and authentic assessment practices.

#3. Become the “orchestrator” of authentic assessments across people, contexts, and occasions.

Teams using an authentic assessment approach to early childhood intervention are effective when a team leader orchestrates the assessments and coordinates team decision making. The team leader facilitates and organizes the assessment procedures and reporting. Additionally, the team leader coordinates the decision making process and intervention planning, ascertaining that parents remain integral team members during the process.

Team leaders may be school psychologists, early intervention specialists, social worker, or other members of the team depending on the child's needs. The team leader makes sure that each team members understands their assessment responsibilities. For example, the team leaders

ensures that unique information is collected from the parents regarding the child's skills, and that teacher information is gathered regarding the child's learning and social behaviors at school.

Furthermore, the team leader synthesizes and organizes the information from the team to create a unified report. The team leader may also orchestrate a plan for progress monitoring and follow-up.

#4. Incorporate assessment materials and equipment that are inviting, fun and motivating to children.

For assessment approaches to be authentic, they need to reflect the ongoing experiences children may encounter in their home, school, community, and other places where young children spend time. The authentic assessment should closely resemble the real life conditions under which the behaviors/skills are needed and materials used to assess children should closely resemble those needed for the activity (e.g., mealtime). Circumvent situations where table-top testing is used to assess young children. When assessment includes the actual or authentic activity, the child is operating under more usual conditions and has experience performing similar tasks. Possibly a more accurate picture can be taken of the child's true ability. Include familiar materials to assess children like common toys or household items.

#5. Match the team assessment model to the child.

Team assessment models in early childhood intervention include interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary models of assessment. Interdisciplinary teams assess children individually, but consult and integrate common goals across developmental areas and develop a unified report. Members of transdisciplinary teams jointly assess children and share their expertise across disciplines.

In authentic assessment, the team collaboratively makes a decision as to the preferred model of teamwork. Additionally, teamwork models depend on the severity of the child's needs and/or service setting. For example, depending on the physical needs of the child, the team may rely on parent observation and report of child's motor skills at home, or collect information from the parent and a physical therapist who observed the child with the parent at home.

#6. Rely on parent judgments and observations.

Today assessment practices are more ecologically-based than they were in the past. Settings where children are assessed tend to be more naturalistic and representative of the types of places children spend their time. Assessments often occur in settings that are comfortable and familiar to the child, instead of a clinic or unfamiliar environment. Family members are included in the authentic assessment process. Bailey and his colleagues (2006) recommend families understand their child's strengths, abilities, and special needs. Families call for emotional, material, and informational support (McWilliam, 2005). Rapport and a trusting relationship should be fostered with the child's family. Talk to parents and family members about the child and encourage them to share their observations in order to better understand the child's skills across people and settings (Guralnick, 2006). Explain the authentic assessment process to families. Provide information to the family about a particular assessment tool(s) that will be used. Ask questions to validate the assessment process, explain results, address difficult issues, and provide resources to encourage continued parental involvement (Brink, 2002; Dunst, Johanson, Trivette, & Hamby, 1991).

#7. Select a common instrument to unify interdisciplinary and interagency teamwork.

Interdisciplinary teams typically utilize curriculum-based assessments to guide the authentic assessment process. Curriculum-based instruments link assessment to programming

and intervention planning. Curriculum-based assessments are also designed to gather information from various sources, including parents and teachers, and can be used for progress monitoring.

Curriculum-based assessments frequently used in early childhood intervention programs include the Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System (AEPS); the Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP); and the Carolina Curriculum for Young Children with Special Needs.

#8. Employ jargon-free materials.

Communicate with families and other professionals using common terms. Watson, Kiekhefer, and Olshansky (2006) describe communication in terms of content and relationship dimensions. Written and verbal communication related to authentic assessment should avoid the use of technical language or acronyms so that information is accessible to a wide audience.

Jargon-free materials make it easier to communicate content, as well as build positive relationships by facilitating clear communication.

#9. Use sensitive instruments to gauge child progress.

Development is shaped by the ongoing interactions between children and their social environment, and these negotiations have important consequences for learning and development (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). It is important to make use of a tool that can capture the developmental changes that are occurring. The information collected from an authentic approach is used to create learning goals/objectives, plan or create instruction and a curriculum, and evaluate the effectiveness of a program (Bricker, 1996; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2005). There are several commercially available instruments to monitor child learning and development using authentic assessment practices. For more information on these instruments, the reader is referred to the book by Bagnato, Neisworth, & Munson, 1997.

#10. Use technology to facilitate authentic assessments and progress or program evaluations.

We now have more tools with a wider range of applications (Hutlinger & Johanson, 2000; McConnell, Priest, Davis, & McEvoy, 2000). Recent advances in technology have the potential to make it easier for providers and families to use authentic assessment. For example, there are several web-based data management systems to record individual and group information that offer the following options: automatic scoring, child journaling, progress reports, links to accountability reporting (e.g., state, federal- OSEP, Head Start, etc.), assessment activities, and online curriculum. Electronic portfolios can document child progress over time and some have family modules that allow the child's caregivers the opportunity to upload artifacts collected across people, places, and settings. Consider training needs of users, access, and associated costs when selecting technology.

When authentic assessments are used in conjunction with the ongoing interactions children have with their typical environment, the assessments are potentially non-stigmatizing, use children's motivation, aid in decision-making, and involve families. These ten big ideas are intended to support the implementation and use of authentic assessment practices in early childhood programs.

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Table 1

Ten Big Ideas for Implementing Authentic Assessment Practices

10 Big Ideas – Authentic Assessment	
1	Share assessment responsibilities with a team.
2	Conduct assessment over time.
3	Become the “orchestrator” of authentic assessments across people, contexts, and occasions.
4	Incorporate assessment materials and equipment that are inviting, fun and motivating to children.
5	Match the team assessment model to the child.
6	Rely on parent judgments and observations.
7	Select a common instrument to unify interdisciplinary and interagency teamwork.
8	Employ jargon-free materials.
9	Use sensitive instruments to gauge child progress.
10	Use technology to facilitate authentic assessments and progress or program evaluations.

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