

*This tip sheet introduces the Authentic Assessment Cycle and why it is important to embed within programs and practices that serve children.*

We have all been assessed in various ways throughout our lives. Assessment comes in many forms. If you have gone through the process of getting a driver's license, you've undergone two forms of assessment required by the state. You took a multiple-choice exam, as well as a behind-the-wheel test. Both evaluation methods are important. The exam measures your foundational knowledge of the rules and regulations of the road. It would be hard to measure all of these pieces when behind the wheel, as they need to be ingrained in us before we get on the road. The behind-the-wheel test is also vital, because it shows that you can implement appropriate rules and regulations in real-world situations.

Authentic assessment is a cooperative collaboration among classroom staff, parents, home-caregivers, and others that have a regular presence in a child's life. Each person contributes knowledge about the child to get the fullest picture possible of the child's developmental progress. It is integral to informing the decisions made and actions taken in supporting the child's instruction.

Authentic assessment is embedded within routines, so that it is a natural part of the teaching and learning process. Data collected about a child can then be used in a systematic way to impact teaching and classroom practices. Used in this way, the Authentic Assessment cycle optimizes developmental growth and outcomes. (Bagnato & Yeh Ho, 2006; CEED, 2017; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004).

## WHAT IS AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT?

As a teacher in a classroom, we naturally function within "daily routines of interacting, observing, planning, and teaching children." (CEED, 2017, p. 8). When we intentionally collect concrete data, connect the findings to formal assessment tools, and then use that evidence to plan and adapt teaching practices for the benefit of students, we are implementing the authentic assessment cycle.

Authentic Assessment is recommended practice when it comes to gaining a holistic perspective on a particular child's development (Bagnato, et al. 2014). In their seminal work, Bagnato and Yeh Ho define authentic assessment as the "systematic recording of developmental observations over time about the naturally occurring behaviors and functional competencies of young children in daily routines by familiar and knowledgeable caregivers in the child's life" (2006, p. 29).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

- **FORMATIVE** - the data accumulated about the child helps inform future instruction and possible environmental changes
- **AUTHENTIC** - observations take into account the broader context of the environment and child, as well as child-specific interests, strengths, and meaning
- **HOLISTIC** - considers the whole child, and the inter-relation of multiple domains of development (i.e., fine and gross motor, social-emotional, cognitive, etc.)
- **DATA-DRIVEN** - gathers information through documented observations and interactions to use in planning and teaching

## WHY AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT?

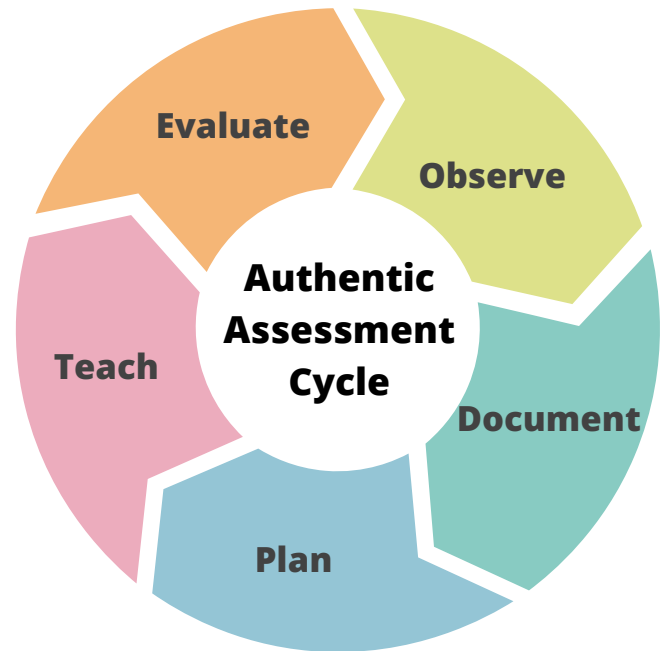
Child development is complex. In a spider's web, you can't pull one thread without making the entire web vibrate. The same is true with children; all developmental domains are interconnected. A red-flag in one developmental domain may indicate an issue in another, integrated domain. For example, a child who demonstrates a need to build capacity in self-regulation, could potentially require support in a number of domains including: cognitive domain or social-emotional domain. We won't know where to target support until we look at the whole child through authentic assessment (NAEYC, n.d.).

Authentic Assessment (Bagnato & Yeh Ho, 2006, p. 16; Bagnato, et al. 2014):

- is embedded within curriculum, allowing for data-based decision making around classroom instruction and environment
- is a cooperative and collaborative process
- is intended to help educators, families, and caregivers learn more about children, and highlights those who may need extra evaluation and support
- assesses what individual children can do, embedding individual goals within daily routines
- makes assessment part of the learning process
- can help evaluate program effectiveness

## OBSERVE AND DOCUMENT

Data collection is a critical component to the authentic assessment cycle. Observation and documentation are the most common form of data collection. Observation includes both quantitative data (anything that can be counted or measured; numerical data) and qualitative data (descriptive information).



It is important to collect and document observations in a timely and purposeful way, so that relevant details are not lost. Some documentation and collection suggestions are:

- Observations and notes
- Checklists
- Frequency charts
- Work samples
- Family anecdotes
- Photos, videos, or audio recordings

(See New York State Department of Education, n.d., from reference list for descriptions of each).

The key is to be intentional and focused in gathering data, over time, through various means (ECLKC, 2019). We must make sure we are selecting the best tool or method to capture what we are looking for. It's important to check with program leaders as well, as states and districts often have specific guidelines or approved systems for collecting, tracking, and using data. Information about the Minnesota Department of Education assessments can be found on their Assessment in Early Childhood page on the MDE website.

## DEFINING IT

Words like “intentional” and “purposeful” can be vague and subjective. Even the term “data” can be confusing. It’s important to have common definitions for terms such as these:

### Data

Information, both qualitative and quantitative, that can give a full picture of growth and development. This can take the form of informal observations, portfolios, anecdotal observation records, checklists, and other methods to understand children's developmental progress over time (Head Start)

### Intentional

done by design with an awareness of an end to be achieved

### Purposeful

done with meaning

### Domain

"Major areas of development and learning" (MN ECIPs)

## PLAN

Once the data has been analyzed and the summary on a child is accurate, it’s time to plan. Planning is where we make adjustments to instructional strategies or how information gets shared with young children. For instance, if we have a classroom of 3-5 year old children and we see that the 3 year olds are at different levels of understanding letters and sounds compared to the 5 year olds (which is what we should expect), then the teacher may plan to create a number of small groups to teach literacy skills rather than trying to teach to the large group.

## TEACH

Now it’s time for action! Let’s implement our plan! As much as possible, it’s important to embed evidence-based interventions and support within everyday routines and instruction. Remember that child development is complex, so embedding within the everyday when possible, rather than isolated intervention time, allows for those interconnected domains to synchronously work together. Instruction can occur at home and at school – in the child’s natural environments.

## EVALUATE

Evaluation is looking at the data we’ve collected, developing hypothesis based on the data, and then making decisions based on that data. This is where we ask questions, look for patterns in the data, and compare observations to developmental milestones and educational standards. Additionally, we determine if more information is needed and talk to families to make sure that the summary is making sense to others who know the child.

And because children keep developing and learning, be sure to continue the cycle! Observe and document to see how your plan is working and how the individual child is responding to the changes. Then, adjust accordingly by continuing to add and change to improve classroom practices through the use of the Authentic Assessment cycle.

## THE ROLE OF IMPLICIT BIAS IN AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

The National Association for the Education of Young Children cautions that assessments “need to be conducted in ways that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to authentically assess children’s learning. This means that not only must the methods of assessment, both formal and informal, be developmentally, culturally, and linguistically sensitive, but also the assessor must be aware of and work against the possibility of implicit and explicit bias, for example through training, reflection, and regular reviews of collected data.”

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

A well-known proverb states that “it takes a village to raise a child.” According to the article *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: Understanding and Expanding the Concept of the “Village”* by Reupert et al. (2022, p. 2), this proverb “conveys the message that it takes many people (‘the village’) to provide a safe, healthy environment for children, where children are given the security they need to develop and flourish, and to be able to realize their hopes and dreams.”

## “It takes a village to raise a child”

When it comes to the holistic nature of authentic assessment, this “village” is vital in making sure that a child is hitting developmental milestones across environments and to intervene if that child is not.

The ultimate intent of authentic assessment is to determine what each child knows and how best to support them in learning the next level of developmentally-appropriate skills. This information allows teachers to make informed decisions about instructional strategies for individuals, for groups of children, and for the entire classroom of children. As an example, if a teacher of a classroom full of 4-year old children observes that most of the children are struggling to sort objects by size, shape, or color, the teacher may choose to provide several opportunities to practice building these skills in all areas of the classroom. If that same teacher notices that a subset of children are struggling with letter recognition, the teacher might use an activity such as a letter recognition game that can be modified to meet children’s developmental level. The teacher could break the children into small groups and modify the game so that the children who are struggling are expected to know a smaller amount of letters compared to those who have mastered letter recognition.

# Introducing It: The Authentic Assessment Cycle and Its Role in Early Childhood Education

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Growth and development, especially in the early years, is complex and can often happen rapidly. We who work with young children have the challenging task of supporting this dynamic time. To ensure that instructional strategies are modified to meet the diverse needs of children, we must know and understand both early learning guidelines, developmentally-appropriate practices, and the curriculum being implemented. This supports the holistic nature of child development and early child education.

## DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic,

Refer to the book **Basics of Assessment: A Primer for Early Childhood Educators** by Deborah J. Leong, Elena Bodrova, and Oralie McAfee

Visit NAEYC's DAP: Observing, documenting, and assessing children's development and learning: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/assessing-development>

Please visit CEED's website: <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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