

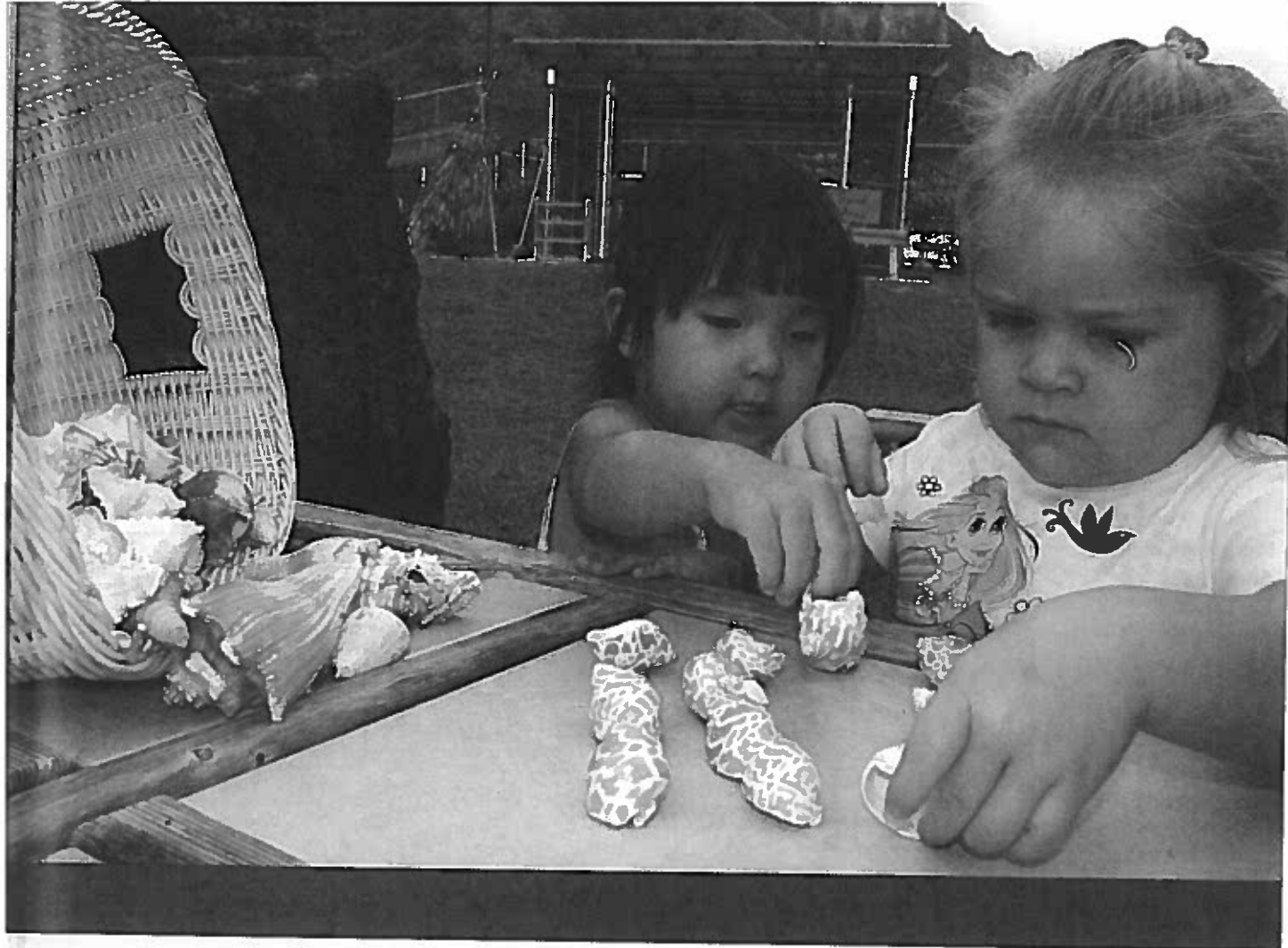
Using Documentation and Assessment to Support Children's Learning

DOCUMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT PLAY A critical role in developmentally appropriate practice. Using results from individual child assessments, teachers and families can work together to meet children's unique needs. Administrators rely on program assessments to collect, analyze, and apply information about the overall success of their program's approach. Findings from classroom and program assessments help determine how administrators can better support staff, how staff can improve teaching practices, and how everyone can ensure quality for children and families.

The articles in this cluster highlight the value of child and program documentation and assessment for a variety of settings, from infant and toddler groups through third grade classrooms. The authors emphasize throughout several critical indicators of effective assessment practices: teachers use assessments that are appropriate for children's ages and other characteristics, they gather evidence from multiple sources over time, and they measure children's strengths and needs (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003). The teachers featured in these articles illustrate the ultimate goal of documentation and assessment, which is, of course, to better understand and improve children's learning and development.

The cluster opens with "Engaging Families in the Child Assessment Process," by Margaret Caspe, Andrew Seltzer, Joy Lorenzo Kennedy, Moria Cappio, and Cristian DeLorenzo. The authors share how the Children's Aid Society, providing early childhood services in New York City to children from birth through age 5, integrates families into the child assessment process through several strategies. Staff create multiple opportunities for teachers and families to communicate, ensure that assessments include evidence from multiple settings, use assessment results to connect home and school teaching practices, help families make connections between assessments and education standards, and invite families to join a community of learners around child assessment.

"Using Classroom Quality Assessments to Inform Teacher Decisions," by Shannon S. Guss, Diane M. Horm, Emma Lang, Shawn M. Krehbiel, Jennifer A. Petty, Kari Austin, Cindee Bergren, Ashley Brown, and Shaunna Holloway, describes how toddler teachers use results from a classroom observational assessment. In the case discussed in this article, the master teacher's skilled facilitation and understanding of the assessment tool, as well as the mutual respect between the teaching staff and the master teacher, is a model for talking about,



interpreting, and using classroom assessment data to inspire staff self-reflection and improve classroom practices.

In "Appropriate and Meaningful Assessment in Family-Centered Programs," James Elicker and Mary Benson McMullen emphasize the importance of continuous assessment for infants and toddlers, including ways teachers can collect, document, organize, and maintain information. Assessment strategies include writing in journals and blogs, using photo documentation, and creating developmental portfolios. The authors stress the importance of reflecting on information gathered in collaboration with colleagues and families and ways to use that information for setting goals and meeting the needs of individual children and groups.

"Teacher-Made Assessments Show Children's Growth," by Christine J. Ferguson, Susan K. Green, and Carol A. Marchel, illustrates a five-step process to help teachers of primary-age children design developmentally appropriate assessments, including checklists to track children's progress in literacy and math learning. Readers also learn about the importance of collecting data across time and about key questions to guide teachers in thinking about the data they collect.

"Portfolio Picks: An Approach for Developing Children's Metacognition," by Elida Velez Laski, shares how portfolio assessment helps teachers meet individual children's needs. The article emphasizes the benefits of including children in the selection of portfolio pieces, illustrating how it promotes children's metacognition (thinking about thinking)—an important skill for learning. The author shows three distinct strategies preschool and kindergarten teachers can use during the selection of portfolio pieces with children to build children's metacognition skills.

We hope these articles inspire you to enhance your current assessment practices in order to better serve children and families.

—Amy Shillady, *Journal Editor*

Reference

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Using
Documentation
and
Assessment
to Support
Children's
Learning

Margaret Caspe,
Andrew Seltzer,
Joy Lorenzo
Kennedy,
Moria Cappio,
and Cristian
DeLorenzo



Infants, Toddlers, and Preschool

Engaging Families in the Child Assessment Process

A CHILD'S FIRST ASSESSORS ARE HER family. *Is she hungry? Does her diaper need to be changed? How is she growing? When the young child enters an early childhood setting, though, the responsibility for developmental assessment is increasingly shared with teachers and other professionals. Is she learning at an appropriate rate? Is she meeting her milestones? How can we tailor the program to better meet her strengths and needs?*

Because families play such an integral role in children's lives, it is essential for families and teachers to work together to promote children's development. For this reason, our organization, the Children's Aid Society (CAS), has worked intentionally to make child assessment an integrated and collaborative effort between families and practitioners. This collaboration allows teachers and families to gain insight into a child's skills

and developmental needs across the contexts of home, school, and community. Founded in 1853, CAS currently provides early childhood services in New York City to nearly 1,000 children from birth through age 5 and their families. We offer a variety of comprehensive home-based and center-based programs with enriching curriculum, quality instruction, and a range of family supports that promote children's development, including family counseling and comprehensive health services.

Collaborative assessment: Background and definitions

Guidelines for administering and using child assessments emphasize the importance of involving families (NRC 2008). In the broadest sense, assessment refers to the ongoing process of monitoring a child's competencies and using this information to improve the child's learning (ECLKC 2013). Assessment often takes the form of

teacher observation records, checklists that teachers complete, and samples of children's work. Involving families in this process enables them to share their expertise about their children and creates an exchange of information between families and teachers that supports children as their strengths and needs change.

Collaborative assessment creates a common basis for discussion, allowing teachers and families to set realistic goals for children's learning. Moreover, children thrive when they are part of a community in which families and teachers understand children's strengths and areas of need and then individualize teaching to match the children's capabilities (Copple & Bredekamp 2009). For example, a child might demonstrate emerging mathematical ability in the home when involved in routine activities like counting the number of dinner plates when setting the table. However, the child might have difficulty transferring those competencies to number activities in the classroom. Collaborative

assessment shines a spotlight on these discontinuities to help teachers support the child's development.

Promising practices for engaging families in the assessment process

While there is consensus that families should be involved in the assessment process, different branches of the early childhood field tend to conceptualize families' roles and responsibilities in overlapping yet different ways. Each branch contributes important lessons on the best ways to engage families in child assessment. CAS has used a combination of these approaches with children in our programs from birth through age 5. At Children's Aid Society, we attempt to draw from three perspectives (see "How Different Branches of the Early Education Field Integrate Families Into the Assessment Process") to develop strategies that better integrate families into our child assessment process. The following are five promising practices that our

How Different Branches of the Early Education Field Integrate Families Into the Assessment Process

| Role | Focus | Mechanisms |
|---|----------------------------------|--|
| Psychologists and special needs experts | Using family-centered assessment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Putting families at the center of the assessment process ■ Promoting families as informants, raters of child behavior, and/or active assessors (Crals, Roy, & Free 2006) |
| Early childhood practitioners | Fostering family engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employing effective observational tools and techniques in the classroom ■ Creating effective family-practitioner interactions ■ Integrating families' input and assessment measures into the existing structure of the teaching day (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller 2007) |
| Early childhood advocates and policy makers | Empowering families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Providing families with access to assessment information and data ■ Promoting families' understanding of the information provided ■ Creating opportunities for families to take action on behalf of their children, based on assessment results (Weiss, Lopez, & Stark 2010) |

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educational team has instituted to foster collaborative child assessment.

1. Create various opportunities for families and teachers to communicate

Families and teachers need numerous opportunities to communicate about children's development (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2004). To be meaningful, the information teachers provide to families must be unbiased, clear, jargon free, and presented in different ways. Some families prefer seeing charts and checklists of children's progress, while others prefer portfolios or observational narratives. It is important for educators to provide notes and documentation in each family's home language.

While family-teacher conferences are one important avenue for conversations about children's progress, on-going written notes, phone calls, and home visits also offer occasions for parents and teachers to discuss an individual child's assessments. In each of these interactions, it is important to find ways for families to receive the information and take an active role in the assessment process. To achieve this, Children's Aid Society programs use both formal standardized tools and organic informal discussions.

For instance, our Early Head Start programs use The Ounce Scale assessment for children ages 0-36 months, which contains a Family Album component (Meisels et al. 2003). Parents receive a booklet in which to write down, draw, or include photos to show their own observations of their children. They use these to prompt conversations with teachers. Although families complete this activity as part of a standardized assessment, teachers in other programs can easily draw on scrapbooking and journaling as ways for families to chronicle children's development in the home and share their observations with the children's teachers.

CAS programs also use the Ages and Stages Questionnaires for children ages 0-5 in which both families and teachers rate children on various aspects of their development (Squires & Bricker 2009). In our 0-3 programs, home visitors complete the questionnaires together with families. In our preschool-age programs, families answer the questionnaires at home and return them to the teachers who review the results and use them as a starting point for discussion. Both methods allow our staff to gain the family's perspectives on the child and his or her social, emotional, and cognitive development, and to ensure that communication is bi-directional, with information flowing in both directions between families and practitioners.

Our programs also rely on informal discussions to understand families' evaluations of their children. For example, a mother recently approached a CAS teacher with concerns that her child was extremely active at home. She was worried that he might have an attention deficit disorder. The teacher, however, did not observe these behaviors in



the classroom. After consulting with the program psychologist (one of the authors), the teacher invited the mother to observe the child in the classroom. The clinician joined the observation, and while the two watched the child, he explained the different ways he perceived the child showing control and attentive mastery of his environment. This guided observation helped alleviate the mother's concerns and gave the teacher deeper insight into how the structure of her classroom was benefiting the child's development.

2. Ensure assessments include children's development and behavior in multiple settings

Children develop and learn in multiple settings, including the home environment, the early education setting, the neighborhood, and the larger culture (Bronfenbrenner 1989). A complete assessment evaluates how children perform at the program and at home. In CAS programs, our family partnership staff begin the enrollment process by conducting a home visit, during which they get to know the family and child by interviewing them at home. Although the home visits are made as part of the Early Head Start and Head Start requirements, this method is an extraordinary way for any practitioner to develop trusting relationships with families and gain better insight into children's development as well as their social and cultural backgrounds. Even short 30-minute visits make a difference.

When developing the activities for preschool-age children, we learned that many families supported children's language and literacy in the home by sharing elaborate oral stories—detailed narratives told with vivid vocabulary about true or imaginary events—with their children, rather than reading books with them. To build on this family strength, we took photographs of the surrounding community and developed questions to match each picture, with the intent to spark new and interesting conversations between families and children. For example, we provided a photograph of an ambulance in one of the activities, asking, “Why do you think an ambulance makes such a loud noise?” and “Where does an ambulance travel?” Activities can also be tailored to the specific needs of each child. For example, with children for whom letter, number, shape, or color recognition is a targeted growth area, families might also choose to talk about the letters and words on the ambulance or the colors they see.

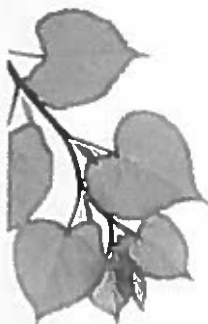
As part of the language and literacy development project, once a month preschool teachers ask families to reflect informally on using the activities, noting their thoughts in a journal. These journal reflections provide an important window into families' assessments of their children's learning. We learned that families using these activities see many changes in their 3- and 4-year-old children over the course of the year in different developmental areas. Families report being surprised by what their children say during activities,

indicate that they didn't realize that their children knew certain things, and are proud of their children's abilities to explain books, count, or sing. These activities bolster the parent-child relationship, help families increase the ways they use language and learning opportunities during daily routines, and encourage families to set aside specific time to listen to children share their feelings and ideas.

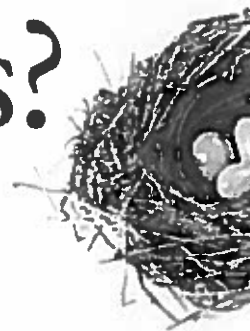
Journal reflections provide an important window into families' assessments of their children's learning.

4. Help families make connections between assessments and educational standards

Early childhood practitioners are increasingly called on to align curriculum and instruction with standards developed at the local, state, and national levels (NAEYC 2012). These standards are critical in helping teachers and families understand the generally agreed-on developmental expectations for children of different ages. For example, New York State has adopted the Common Core State Standards, which indicate that children in prekindergarten are expected to demonstrate increasing awareness and competence in several areas, including physical development and health, social and emotional development, and language and literacy (NYSED 2011).



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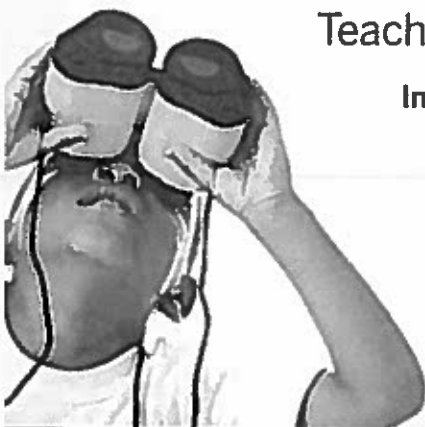
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Family Connection

Shortly after visiting the home, family partnership staff conduct a Family Partnership Assessment (FPA) either in the home or at the program. The FPA is an approximately 40-item questionnaire developed by CAS staff that taps into the seven family outcomes promoted in the Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework (HHS 2011), such as family well-being and positive parent-child relationships. Staff ask families to speak about their daily life in the home, their community participation, their interactions with each other and their children, their perceptions of their children, and their hopes and dreams for themselves and their children.

For instance, families indicate how often they read books at home, visit the library, or sing songs with their children—all behaviors that are highly predictive of children's success. Moreover, families specify different workshop topics they are interested in or ways they might need support for their well-being. This process is particularly important for CAS programs because we serve a predominantly immigrant population who might not be familiar with the US education system. The FPA provides an opportunity for us to begin a conversation with families regarding their strengths and about program and school expectations.

In addition, staff from different program areas (for example, special needs coordinator, mental health workers, health clinicians, classroom teachers, and home visitors) come together at least once a year (or more frequently depending on a family's needs) to meet in coordinated conferences to share their perspectives on each child. This integrated approach generates an understanding of a child and his or her family, and allows staff to formulate strategies that include the entire family when seeking the best way to assist the child. Understanding the family context also allows staff to connect families with the comprehensive supports they need.

3. Use assessment results to connect home and school teaching practices

Assessment results provide teachers and families with greater under-

standing of children's development. However, it is not enough for family members to understand their children's development. Families must have the tools, resources, and confidence to act on this information to further children's learning in supportive and caring relationships (Weiss, Lopez, & Stark 2010). As one example, in response to evaluation findings showing that the language and literacy development of children in CAS programs needed more attention, teachers and families worked together to create developmentally and culturally appropriate home-school connection activities for families and children to do at home.



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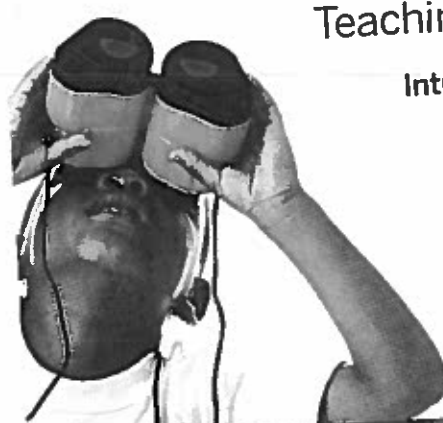
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Today, a variety of assessment systems that align with these prekindergarten standards are available for teacher use; two such examples are the Work Sampling System and Teaching Strategies GOLD. Children's Aid Society recently invested in one of these assessment systems, and preschool teachers have reported that it provides an effective starting point for conversations with families about setting goals for children's learning. For example, systems provide parent-teacher conference forms and online parent newsletter templates that concretely link children's progress to expectations for typical developmental progression.

Additionally, we have found that classroom meetings, parenting groups, schoolwide workshops, and in-school family events provide a chance for preschool staff and families to talk about standards and how they relate to child development and learning milestones. During these discussions, practitioners and families can explore what children should know and be able to do at different ages, and how the prevailing standards might differ from expectations when the parents were growing up. These conversations are especially important for families who might have been educated in different countries and are new to the school system in the United States. Moreover, by aggregating child-level assessment data—that is, by mathematically combining data about groups of children to provide an overall summary of their progress—practitioners can talk to families about overall program performance. Using assessment results in

this way allows families to understand how their individual child compares to others of the same age both at the local program level and in comparison to national norms. We also explain that each child follows an individual path for development in the early years and that development can be uneven across domains. For example, a child might excel in gross motor skills in comparison to her peers but need additional supports in the area of social-emotional development.

5. Invite families to join a community of learners around child assessment

To effectively engage families in collaborative assessment, it is important that all stakeholders in the process come together to share ideas and lessons learned. This can happen at the program and community levels. As an example of community-level engagement, in 2011 and again in 2012, a group of local parents, practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and advocates convened at New York University's Forum on Children and Families to discuss child assessment (CFPC 2012). Following the 2011 Forum, a working group explored family engagement in the assessment process. The group created a Parents' Bill of Rights designed to better inform parents about their rights during the child assessment process; this bill of rights was then presented and disseminated at the 2012 Forum. The bill of rights included items such as

- The right to be treated with respect and to be a part of the assessment process

- The right to request a meeting with program staff who can explain your child's assessment results in a language you can understand

CAS administrators participated in this community-wide effort to foster a collaborative relationship between teachers and families throughout the assessment process and circulated information back to teachers and families at program sites.

In addition to these kinds of community-level opportunities, at the program level, our early childhood administrators bring teachers together regularly throughout the year to discuss classroom-based assessments. For example, at the beginning of every year, formal training is conducted for all CAS home visitors of children ages 0–3 and teachers of 3- and 4-year-olds to ensure that they are administering and scoring mandatory screening assessments in the correct way across all programs. We also bring the teachers together to review as a group children's work samples to ensure that the teachers understand and rate children's abilities consistently. It is essential that teachers use consistently the different scoring rubrics that CAS uses, so that families can be sure that, for example, a 4 means the same thing from one classroom to the next. This gives families confidence that the assessment process is objective and that their children would be assessed the same way by a teacher in another class.

We are now beginning to include families in these trainings and discussions. While this is a new area of focus, we believe that it will help us improve in our attempts to understand, respect, and incorporate families' cultural backgrounds into our assessment practices. Some steps we hope to take to improve these efforts are (1) to conduct informal interviews with a diverse group of families to see how they assess children's work and understand their perspectives, and (2) to invite groups of families to talk to teachers about their own methods of evaluating their children's growth in the home.

Concluding thoughts

Effective child assessment integrates families into the assessment process in a collaborative and welcoming exchange of knowledge. The suggestions we provide here are methods that Children's Aid Society programs have used to foster successful collaborative assessment. An integrated, collaborative assessment approach creates many opportunities for two-way communication, empowers families, and takes both cultural differences and formal standards into account, all within a community of learners. Families are the constant in children's lives: they are the experts on their children's habits, interests, and abilities. By inviting families to participate in the assessment process, early childhood educators gain access to an invaluable resource for understanding each child's individual needs and abilities.

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