riding the assessment tide

The realities of implementing child assessment systems in EC programs

by Erin Oldham and Peg Sprague

The tide is coming. If it hasn't affected your program, we'd be surprised. Scientifically–based child assessment tools, observation, screening, portfolios, individualized research-based curriculum . . . sound familiar? These are now requirements for accreditation by the NAEYC. Head Start has set them as expectations in their performance standards. And increasingly, entities that fund early childhood programs are looking to the use of child assessment tools as a way of gauging a program's quality and improving its outcomes for children. For example, expectations to assess children with research based tools are fast becoming part of funding requirements for agencies funded by United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley and for state pre-kindergarten programs.

But are early childhood programs ready for these new expectations and requirements? A needs assessment conducted for United Way by Brandeis University in 2005 estimated that 28% of all children in UW programs had social and emotional challenges, but just half of United Way-funded agencies reported using standardized child assessment measures.

There are now good resources available to help early childhood programs set up and establish an assessment system for early learners. But how does the theory of implementing child assessment systems stand up in practice? What does the research say about how setting up such a system affects children, their teachers, and child care administrators? Where do teachers find the time? How can child care directors best support staff? How does a program even begin without becoming quickly overwhelmed?

UW Funded Programs

- 5 center-based programs

- 2 programs with both centers and family child care homes

- 1 family child care agency

- Programs received between $8,500 - $19,000 depending on number of children and need. This translated to between $109 — $245 per child.

- Programs could choose Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum, Focused Portfolios, High Scope Child Outcomes Record (COR), or Work Sampling.

In 2006-2007, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley sought to build the capacity of some of its early childhood programs to help assess children's growth and development, measure outcomes, inform teaching strategies, and improve program quality. United Way funded eight child assessment initiatives in early childhood programs with limited assessment experience. Programs were chosen based on their 'readiness' for implementing a child assessment tool and given 18 months of funding to fully implement the child assessment tool. Once chosen to participate, programs could choose one of four child assessment tools (see side bar). An outside evaluator was hired to provide

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programs guidance in choosing a tool, hiring a trainer, and implementing the child assessment system.

What were the programs expected to do?

The programs were expected to train their staff on the child assessment tool, build observation and assessment into their daily routine, assess all children in the targeted classrooms or family child care homes on a regular basis, and hold parent-teacher conferences at least twice a year.

Did the programs succeed?

Programs reported greater involvement of families, greater feelings of professionalism among staff, increased referral of children to special services, better ability to individualize curriculum, and increased information to use in supervision of staff. At the end of the grant (about 18 months), 83% of teachers had been trained, 97% of children had been assessed, and 56% of parents had participated in a parent-teacher conference.

What are the realities of implementing a child assessment system?

Over the 18 months of the project, we were able to identify "lessons learned" through phone interviews every six months with the program director, a site visit mid-way through the grant with teachers and directors, two face-to-face networking sessions with all grantees, two teacher surveys, and a parent survey.

◆ It takes a while!
Six months into the grant, about two-thirds of the teachers had been trained across the programs, but no child assessments had taken place. Twelve months into the grant, 90% of the

teachers had been trained and three-quarters of the children had been assessed. Finally, 18 months into the grant, all of the children had been assessed. In reality, it took between 6 to 12 months for all teachers to be trained and a year and a half for all of the children to be assessed.

◆ Continued effort is necessary to keep it going!
As teachers leave and new teachers are hired (through in-house transfers or from outside of the program), the challenge becomes how to adequately train them on the child assessment tool. The percentage of teachers trained at 18 months into the grant was actually lower than at 12 months (it decreased from 90% of teachers to 80% of teachers). That is solely because of teacher turnover! Continued staff training is especially important for newly hired staff.

We asked teachers how often training of child assessment should happen. Four out of 10 teachers thought training should happen at least twice a year. Another four out of 10 teachers thought training should happen once a year.

Directors and teachers had suggestions for making sure staff, especially new staff, has enough information to conduct child observation and assessment in a reliable way. These suggestions included:

• Develop an in-house mentor (or two!) by having that individual attend a train-the-trainer on the assessment tool so they can train all new staff.
• Develop a mentoring network with a neighboring program. Collaborate with neighboring programs using the same assessment tool to pool money to bring in a trainer, or share an individual who has been formally trained on the tool.
• Train *all* of your staff including assistant teachers, directors, and other

administrative staff. You increase the network of people able to provide help to the teachers and reduce knowledge loss with turnover.
• Train your toddler staff — they are setting the foundation of learning for the preschoolers!

◆ It is challenging to get parents involved.
Some programs were surprised that once they got their staff motivated to begin doing observations and assessment, the parents were reluctant to sign up for parent-teacher conferences. This was discouraging to staff. After 12 months of the grant, about 40% of parents had attended a parent-teacher conference. Even at 18 months into the grant, only about 60% f

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Teacher suggestions

■ Wait until the teachers have been doing assessment for 6-12 months before trying to schedule parent-teacher conferences. This allows the teachers to really learn the system and gain confidence in speaking with parents.

■ Be prepared for it to take 3-6 months to get training scheduled and completed!

What do parents think?

■ 93% of parents agreed with the information shared by the teacher in parent-teacher conferences.

■ 89% of parents reported they learned something new about their child.

■ 85% of parents support continuing child assessments.

■ 75% of teachers reported that the parents were enthusiastic about the child assessments.

parents had attended a parent-teacher conference.

Through this project we learned two important lessons. One, it is necessary to "market" the child assessment process to parents and two, engagement of parents increases over time. Programs reported that over time, more parents demonstrated interest in the process and came to the conferences. However, even programs that have been doing assessments for many years find that they only get about 75% of the parents to attend due to scheduling issues and lack of parental interest. However, by marketing the child assessments, your program may be able to get more parents to attend.

Suggestions for marketing child assessment to parents:

• At the time of enrollment, the director should take the time to explain the importance of the child assessment system and the importance of parent involvement in the assessment process. You may want to include the expectation of a parent-teacher conference in any parent contracts.
• If there is an online component, ensure that families are able to get online successfully to see up-to-date documented progress of their child. Demonstrate to families how to use the online component. Give families a tip sheet on how to access their child's information as a reminder.
• Display children's work visibly where parents pick children up. Include an anecdotal note beside the piece of work to demonstrate what the assessment process can tell a parent.
• Display information about what teachers are observing in the classroom (e.g., "This week we are observing how your child interacts with their friends and what they know about patterns.").
• Send home the progress report / assessment for families to read on

their own and then ask (in person, not in a letter) parents to sign up for a parent-teacher conference. Ask the parent "When can we meet?" instead of "Can we meet?". Talk to the children about their parents coming in to see what they are doing at school. Offer to do the parent-teacher conference by phone if necessary.
• Ask for parent input in the form of a checklist periodically throughout the year to include in the assessment of the child.
• Emphasize the importance of school readiness and how the child assessment information better prepares children for kindergarten.

◆ **Staff response will vary**
Just like there is a continuum of developmental skills for children, there is a continuum of skills that teachers possess. Some teachers feel confident in their ability to observe and have taken courses on observation in college; some teachers have not been exposed to observation and assessment. Literacy levels among teachers are also extremely diverse. Some teachers are comfortable writing up observations, whereas some don't feel comfortable writing at all. Teachers who don't speak English as their first language often feel very uncomfortable writing their observations in English (especially when they have to enter them into an online database).

Teachers had good suggestions in this area as well:

• Allow teachers to write observations confidentially. Let them know that no one, including parents and their supervisor, will see their written observations. They will use their observations to fill out the developmental rating scale associated with the assessment tool and that is what the parents will see. These teachers may need some assistance in writing any summary statements for

How do you motivate teachers?

■ "Try to find something like other paperwork that can be replaced by starting the assessments."

■ "Assessments should become part of regular meetings and not something extra."

■ "Regardless of where they are in professional development, treat them like professionals and show them their progress!"

■ "Tell them how it will make their job easier, how it will help kids."

parents.
• For teachers who aren't comfortable writing in English, let them write their observations in their first language. Again, they will use that information to fill out the developmental rating scale. If the parents speak and understand English, the teacher may need assistance in writing up summary statements. One program had the Spanish-speaking teacher write her observations in Spanish, then read them to another teacher, who typed them into the online system and wrote out the summary statement for the parents.
• Ensure that teachers have computer access readily available in their classroom to avoid having to record child observations twice. Teachers should be able to enter observations directly on the computer and should be able to surpass the written step first.

Some challenges and potential solutions to be aware of

◆ **Time!**
This was the biggest challenge. Two-

thirds of teachers had a hard time finding enough time to do the observations and assessments. And about half of teachers felt they had too many children to observe.

Solutions:

• Organization is key! Keep note-cards around the room to write down observations. Organize the focus of the observation by color (e.g., pink cards for peer interaction, green cards for numbers and patterns). Post laminated posters of what teachers should be observing.

• Have teachers take turns observing. If there are two teachers, they can each take half of the children and observe a couple of kids each day or each week. One teacher commented, "We split the children so that each teacher has 10 children to assess. We keep notes and talk to each other and add any other information that the other person has seen."

◆ **Technology**

Too often a barrier for teachers is technology. Access to technology (i.e., computers, printers, digital cameras), outdated technology, limited knowledge of how to utilize technology, and Internet access were barriers to using child assessment systems efficiently and effectively.

Solutions:

• Each classroom should have a computer, printer, and digital camera.

How do children benefit?

■ "Special needs of children are being identified earlier."

■ "Each of the centers has been using this assessment tool and found it helpful in identifying areas of support needed for children. Referrals have been put in place and curriculum has been adapted as a result of the findings."

If a staff person is more comfortable taking pictures and downloading them on the computer, that individual can provide on-site tutorials to other staff members. Often staff become more proficient on the computer quickly if it is accessible to them daily.

• Having the ability for staff to e-mail others (i.e., at a nearby program or the publisher of the child assessment tool) to ask technical questions is often all the help that is needed to move forward.

• On-site technical assistance on how to optimally use technology to assess children should be a part of the program's staff development.

◆ **Children with special needs**

Teachers were concerned about whether the developmental checklists or rating scales would reflect the child's skills and progress. They were also concerned about having to talk to families about the child's development.

Solutions:

• Ask the parents how they think their child is progressing.

• Keep your observations focused on progress and new things the child is learning rather than what they can't do.

• Parents don't need to see the actual checklist that marks where the child is (which is likely below age-expected behavior). Teachers can review the checklist and pick out language that focuses on the positive and how the child is progressing compared to themselves, not compared to other peers.

• Language is important. Say things like "A goal for him is to . . . " and "She is beginning to . . . ". Create a partnership with the parent by saying "I want to work with you to help your child develop and grow . . . ".

◆**What did it cost in the end?**

A number of programs ended up serving more children than they

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planned (by training teachers from other preschool classrooms or using the assessment in the younger age classrooms). Six programs actually spent less per child than they had planned and two classrooms spent more per child. The six programs that lowered their costs spent between $91 and $181 per child (they decreased their cost per child by an average of 26%). Programs reduced costs by coordinating and splitting training costs with other programs; in some cases they had simply overestimated their costs for each classroom and were able to use the assessment tool in more areas of their programming. (It doesn't cost anymore to train all of your teachers!)

Two programs increased their costs. One program exclusively served family child care providers. They found particular challenges in getting providers to attend training (they offered monetary incentives), gearing the training to the population, and getting the providers to actually do and record their observations. To motivate providers, they had a home visitor provide on-site technical assistance, revamp training to make it more meaningful to providers, and continually communicate with providers about the child assessments. These extra activities raised their costs from an anticipated $245 per child to an actual $327 per child. The second program served a Vietnamese population. They had both centers and family child care providers. They

experienced similar challenges with their family child care providers. They ran into the major challenge of having to translate all written materials into Vietnamese. They also needed Vietnamese translation during all training events. This increased their anticipated cost of $130 per child to an actual cost of $157 per child.

◆ **Was it worth the effort?**

Although implementing a child assessment system takes time and patience, there are real benefits! Programs reported greater involvement of families, greater feelings of professionalism among staff, increased referral of children to special services, better ability to individualize curriculum, and increased information to use in supervision of staff.

Programs report that "Families are more involved in the center's programming." Staff felt they were able to give families concrete information about their child's growth and development through the use of a formal assessment system. They also report that staff feels more professional as a result of completing the assessments. There are also clear benefits in terms of referring children to special services. Programs report that special needs are being identified earlier and children were being referred to the services they need. Overall, referrals increased from less than 1% of children being referred in the first six months of

the grant to almost 6% of the children being referred to special services at the end of the grant. This means that more children are getting the services they need.

Most programs involved in the project stated that they needed the most help with individualizing the curriculum based on the assessment results. This is a skill the training only briefly touches upon. However, after 18 months, teachers reported specific examples of how they were able to gear their daily curriculum to the individual needs in the classroom. Teachers commented that:

"I no longer guess where the children are; the chart has shown me where they are developmentally and what areas they need more development in."

"I plan my lesson to focus on skills that I'm assessing. It has made the lessons more exciting and informative about each child's development."

"I base my curriculum on the needs of the children instead of just setting up topics and themes."

"I have started to focus on math because the assessment tool has shown me that I have very limited activities."

Supervisors also report real benefits from going through this process. They

were surprised to learn a great deal about their staff during the training on the child assessments. They learned about the staff's knowledge of observation and assessment; their staff's level of comfort with learning new skills; and, their staff level of comfort with writing. This information helped develop concrete goals for the teachers in terms of developing curriculum, curriculum activities, and completing a certain number of observations on each child. Thus, it helped supervisors with their supervision of the teacher and also helped in planning appropriate in-house staff development opportunities.

The final word

While programs found it challenging to implement a child assessment system, many programs developed innovative solutions to their challenges and spoke very positively about the process in the end. As one program director said:

"This grant has enabled the program to have a scientific way of assessing the children, making parents an active part of the assessment process, and having curriculum planning based on children's individual developmental needs."