



## Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

### Evidence Paper Practice Principle 7: Assessment for learning and development

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## **Practice Principle 7: Assessment for learning and development**

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework guides early childhood professionals' practice in Victoria. The Victorian Framework identifies eight Practice Principles for Learning and Development (Practice Principles). The Practice Principles are based on the P-12 Principles of Learning and Teaching, the pedagogy from the national Early Years Learning Framework, and are informed by the latest research.

The Practice Principles are interrelated and designed to inform each other. They are categorised as Collaborative, Effective and Reflective:

### **Collaborative**

1. Family-centred practice
2. Partnerships with professionals
3. High expectations for every child

### **Effective**

4. Equity and diversity
5. Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
6. Integrated teaching and learning approaches
7. Assessment for learning and development

### **Reflective**

8. Reflective practice

These Evidence Papers document the research that underpins each Practice Principle. The content of the Evidence Papers will be developed into a series of practical guides – Practice Principles in Practice – that will provide practical advice to early childhood professionals on how to align their practice to the Practice Principles.

## Practice Principle 7: Assessment for learning and development

### Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>What do we mean by ‘assessment for learning and development’?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Why is assessment important in early childhood learning and development?</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Assessment as learning helps to make children’s learning visible to themselves .....	9
The process of assessment can empower families as key agents in their child’s learning .....	9
<b>How do we achieve best practice?</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Effective assessment values cultural perspectives of children’s learning.....	10
Effective assessment incorporates children’s views on their learning.....	10
Effective assessment takes families’ perspectives into account.....	11
Effective assessment is meaningful for children when it is authentic .....	11
Effective assessment uses multiple approaches that are appropriate for each child’s competency.....	12
Multiple that assessments occur over time and are holistic contribute to a complete picture of each child.....	13
Professionals take objective, non-judgemental and accurate assessments of children’s learning and development.....	14
<b>Implications for achieving the best outcomes for children</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>18</b>

## Executive Summary

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (2009) recognises the importance of early childhood professionals undertaking assessment as a core part of effective practice. Early childhood professionals assess children's learning and development to develop a strong understanding of each child's strengths, abilities and interests. The information that professionals collect and analyse through the assessment process informs the decisions they make to advance children's learning and development.

Early childhood professionals approach assessment in different ways. Early childhood educators routinely take observations to better understand children's strengths, abilities and interests. Maternal and Child Health nurses undertake assessments of children's health and development according to the Key Age and Stage Framework. Allied health professionals working in early childhood intervention services use a range of professional and clinical assessment tools to identify children's strengths and design programs that best support each child's learning and development.

Assessment practice can be arranged into three categories: assessment *for* learning; assessment *of* learning and assessment *as* learning . Assessment *for* learning involves professionals analysing data about the child's strengths, abilities and interests and making inferences from it which assists them to make decisions about programs for children every day. Assessment *for* learning is identified in the literature as essential to improving outcomes for young children. Assessment *of* learning assists professionals to develop a picture of each child's strengths, abilities and interests at a point in time. Finally, assessment *as* learning occurs when information about children's own learning and development progress is provided to them as feedback on their learning activity. Assessment *as* learning is identified in the literature as important in supporting children's self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Effective assessment is responsive to individual children. That is, it involves tools and approaches that are appropriate to individual children and are undertaken in settings familiar to them. They must also be undertaken regularly and multiple times to ensure a more accurate picture is generated at a point in time, but also so that growth and progress are captured. Importantly, as children are active participants in their own learning and families are experts on their own children, effective assessment processes must include children and families' views of learning, as well as other professionals' views as appropriate.

The implications for practice informed by the research and detailed in this Paper are:

- Early childhood professionals require the knowledge and skills to undertake non-judgemental assessments of children's learning and development
- Assessment needs to be undertaken collaboratively with children, families and professionals
- A culture of evidence-based program and practice decisions must be promoted
- Effective assessment is dynamic and ongoing, just as children's learning and development is dynamic
- A systematic and rigorous approach is needed to support systematic assessment of children's learning and development across services

## Introduction

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework recognises the importance of early childhood professionals assessing children's learning and development to provide essential information about a child's abilities, interests and culture to inform their practice and program decision-making. It states that:

Assessment is designed to discover what children know and understand, based on what they make, write, draw, say and do. Early childhood professionals assess the progress of children's learning and development, what children are ready to learn and how they can be supported.

All children benefit when assessment reflects a whole-child approach, providing an holistic view of learning and development. Early childhood professionals use a range of assessment tools, processes and approaches to build on prior learning, avoid duplication and add value. Early childhood professionals understand that families play a vital role in their children's learning and development.

Early childhood professionals are aware of the health and wellbeing of the family when planning for the child's learning and development. Early childhood professionals assess children's learning in ways that:

- inform their practice
- include children's views of their own learning
- are authentic and responsive to how children demonstrate their learning and development
- draw on families' perspectives, knowledge, experiences and expectations
- consider children in the context of their families and provide support to families when necessary
- value the culturally specific knowledge embedded within communities about children's learning and development
- are transparent and objective, and provide families with information about their children's learning and development, and about what they can do to further support their children
- gather and analyse information from a wide range of sources to help them assess and plan effectively
- provide the best possible advice and guidance to children and their families.

(VEYLDF p. 13)

Assessment in early childhood is not a new practice. Early childhood professionals use a range of assessment tools to identify children's interactions, conversations, ideas and expressions in order to better understand each child's strengths, abilities

and interests. Early childhood educators often use observation techniques to record children's learning. Allied health professionals, such as maternal and child health nurses and early intervention professionals, are experienced at using clinical assessment tools to understand a child's capabilities and possible development and health needs, also with the view to designing a program of support to promote that child's learning and development.

Recent evidence reinforces the effectiveness of objective and systematic assessments of children's learning and development undertaken by early childhood professionals in order to inform responsive programs that support children's learning and development.

This Evidence Paper explores research related to assessment practice in the context of early childhood services. Specifically it will describe why assessment is an important feature of effective practice; how early childhood professionals can integrate assessment into their daily work with children; and what the implications of the research are for practice.

### **What do we mean by 'assessment for learning and development'?**

Assessment practice in education and care can be arranged into three categories: assessment *of* learning and development; assessment *for* learning and development and assessment *as* learning.

Assessment *of* learning and development is the most common form of assessment. This is assessment of a child's learning at a particular point in time, and that summarises all of the learning and development that has preceded it (Taras, 2005). This kind of assessment can be large-scale assessment in a particular field, such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), in which an entire population of children is assessed using a common assessment tool. It can also be a small scale assessment within an individual early childhood setting with the purpose of clarifying a child's learning in order to report that learning to families (Earl, 2003) – for example, Transition Learning and Development Statements.

Assessment *for* learning and development refers to the formative assessment that takes place in order for decisions to be made to inform the next stage of learning (Earl, 2003). As assessment for learning informs program planning decisions about individual children, assessments need to be taken on an ongoing and individual basis. Assessment for learning assists early childhood professionals to make decisions about learning programs for children every day and is identified in the literature as essential for improving outcomes for children.

Within the formative assessment process, early childhood professionals gather evidence of children's learning and development, based on what they write, draw, make, say and do. They analyse this evidence and make inferences from it by applying their knowledge of child development theory, the child's social and cultural background and their knowledge of the five Learning and Development Outcomes in the curriculum frameworks (VEYLDF, Early Years Learning Framework, My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care). They also discuss their interpretation with the child and the child's family, as well as other professionals when appropriate, to develop a strong picture of the child's strengths, abilities and interests. Early childhood professionals then use this information to design effective programs for children that are responsive and evidence-based (Hattie, 2009).

Assessment *as* learning and development occurs when the child is involved in the assessment process. Through this process the child has the opportunity to monitor what they are learning and use feedback to make adjustments to their understandings (Earl, 2003). Assessment as learning is linked to higher levels of self-efficacy in children as they see a reward for their learning effort (OECD/ CERI, 2008).

Assessment practice can be both formal and informal. Formal assessments typically involve reliable and valid standardised testing (Brown and Rolfe, 2005). Informal assessments, on the other hand include non-standardised testing and the performance on these assessments is not compared with other children (Brown and Rolfe, 2005). They typically include interviews with children and work sampling, and observation techniques such as running records, anecdotal records, checklists, rating scales and event and time sampling (MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; NAEYC, 2009). All of these assessment tools are designed to gather information about the progress of children's learning and development (Mindes, 2003) and are used to make children's learning and development visible (Tayler, et al., 2008).

### **Why is assessment important in early childhood learning and development?**

It is now recognised that age alone is not an adequate indicator of a child's skill or capability. There is substantial evidence of the large degree of variation between individual children's cognitive, social and emotional functioning and the impact of children's culture and environment on their knowledge, skills and understandings (Brainerd, 1978; Feldman, 1980; Raban et al., 2007). Early childhood professionals, therefore, cannot simply rely on children's age to determine their capabilities and make appropriate and responsive program decisions. It is for this reason that assessment is so important. Through the process of assessment, professionals

collect evidence of each child's learning and development and analyse and interpret it to make program and intervention decisions for extending the child's learning and development in the future (Bagnato, 2010).

Within this broad rationale for assessment in early childhood, the literature identifies a range of specific purposes of assessment: monitoring children's learning and development progress; making decisions about programs to advance learning and development; identifying children who may benefit from special support or intervention; communicating a child's learning and development with families and other professionals; involving families in planning children's learning in a meaningful way; and evaluating program effectiveness; (Appl, 2000; Bagnato, 2010; Beaty, 2002; Copple and Bredekamp 2006).

*Assessment as learning helps to make children's learning visible to themselves*

The evidence of children's learning gathered through the assessment process can be used powerfully to communicate and make children's own learning visible to them (Carr, 2001). This is useful in promoting children's own self-efficacy – that is, belief in their own ability to take actions that will achieve their goals – as they can see returns and progress for their learning efforts (Uszynska-Jarmoc, 2007). Assessment also supports collaborative practice with children to set challenging learning goals. In this way, assessment is not a one-way process whereby children learn and early childhood professionals assess, but is a dynamic process through which professionals and children learn, analyse and adapt (Kozulin and Falik, 1995).

*The process of assessment can empower families as key agents in their child's learning*

Early childhood professionals routinely work in partnership with children's families and provide valuable information to them about their child's learning and development (Brown and Bortoli, 2010). Families are in a unique position to provide understanding and evidence of their own children's learning abilities (Alasuutari, 2010). The information early childhood professionals collect through the assessment process can also be translated to families to communicate the progress of their child's learning and development (NAEYC, 2009), and support families to build on that learning. Puckett and Black (2008) and Snow and Van Helem (2008) support this, suggesting that assessments that determine the individual strengths and needs of children are particularly useful for families.

## **How do we achieve best practice?**

### *Effective assessment values cultural perspectives of children's learning*

Children's learning and development is informed by their culture, values and experiences. Moreover, cultural background and language significantly influence the knowledge and vocabulary children have developed. Cultural background and language also frame how, and upon what, children can be appropriately assessed (Gullo, 2005). Professionals therefore need to be aware of children and their family's cultural context. On this basis Appl (2000) suggests that approaches used for assessing children need to be culturally sensitive and interesting to children. Using assessment tools that are culturally, linguistically and developmentally appropriate assists the assessment process to be authentic. Further, the assessment process is facilitated when children's interests and daily activities are the base for collecting relevant evidence of the child's learning (Baldwin et al., 2009; Gullo 2005). It is also important that professionals take account of children's cultural context when analysing and interpreting the assessment data, so that an accurate picture is developed.

### *Effective assessment incorporates children's views on their learning*

The Early Years Learning Framework advocates that children are active participants in their own learning (DEEWR, 2009). It is important, therefore, that children are given the opportunity to actively contribute to assessments of their learning and receive feedback on their learning (Seitz and Bartholomew, 2008). There are a number of ways that children's participation can be facilitated.

Shared sustained thinking can provide opportunities for incorporating children's views on their learning into formative assessment. Shared sustained thinking is an open-ended context for exploratory learning in which 'two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative' (Sylva et al., 2010). When children describe, explain and justify their thinking to others in shared sustained thinking, they develop meta-cognition and 'learn to learn' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Shared sustained thinking provides opportunities for formative assessment because it enables early childhood professionals to build an understanding of children's learning in order to make curriculum decisions.

Research also indicates that effective assessment involves children having the time to express their opinions about what is recorded about their learning (Glazzard et al., 2010). According to the NAEYC (2009) children's own evaluations of their work are an important part of their individual assessment.

Other research suggests that there is great value in the feedback children receive on their own learning through the assessment process. Puckett and Black (2008) suggest that early childhood professionals should assist children to reflect on their own learning as well as assist them to set individual goals. Tayler and colleagues (2008) agree that children have the capacity not only to monitor their own progress but to form goals and shape their own future learning. Through feedback and interactions children are able to self-assess and form views about themselves as an effective learner (Tayler et al., 2008).

*Effective assessment takes families' perspectives into account*

Families play an essential role in their child's learning and development and are a valuable source of information about their children (Baldwin et al., 2009; Gullo, 2005; Wortham, 2008). Family's perspectives are particularly useful in providing information regarding a child's history, culture, disposition and abilities in different settings (Brink, 2002). They can also provide information about children's behaviour and learning in different settings. This is important with very young children, particularly in relation to temperament and behaviour (Neisworth and Bagnato, 2004). Including and valuing family perspectives in assessment, therefore, is a key feature of effective assessment (Glazzard et al., 2010, Grisham-Brown et al., 2006). This helps to develop the most accurate image of each child (Brink, 2002; Wortham, 2008). Further emphasising the importance of family's involvement in the assessment process is the clear evidence that family involvement in their children's education has a positive impact on their children's overall learning and development (Beaty, 2002).

Building effective partnerships often requires early childhood professionals to initiate and promote connections and relationships with families. They can do this by reflecting on how much they value the contribution of parents to assessment and whether they consider parents as partners in children's education (Glazzard et al., 2010). Early childhood professionals who genuinely seek to understand families' perspectives about learning and their children are better prepared to be responsive within the family-professional collaboration (Puckett and Black, 2008). Carr and Harris (2001) support this view, suggesting that the best educational climate is collaborative. *See Evidence Paper 1: Family-Centred Practice for more information on working collaboratively with families.*

*Effective assessment is meaningful for children when it is authentic*

Assessments are most accurate and meaningful for children when they are conducted in the child's natural environment, are part of everyday learning experiences, and when they provide opportunities for feedback along the way (Hatch, 2010; Grisham-Brown et al., 2006). Authentic assessments capture children's competencies and incremental developments in their skills (Baldwin et

al., 2009). Glazzard and colleagues (2010) agree that assessing children based on observations in their environment through independent learning and adult-directed learning is an effective assessment process for developing a comprehensive picture of the child's capabilities.

Authentic assessments provide an opportunity for assessment that is free of the adult's own agenda. They are conducted in a variety of contexts such as home and care settings where children are familiar and comfortable in the environment (Losardo and Notari-Syverson, 2001) and are able to use familiar materials that are of interest to them. This helps to facilitate and maintain children's own participation in the assessment (Losardo and Notari-Syverson, 2001). This form of assessment is also effective because it provides children with opportunities to demonstrate their skills across the various developmental domains and varying contexts (Losardo and Notari-Syverson, 2001). This contributes to more accurate assessment. Children's abilities are best displayed in environments where the child is most comfortable, providing familiarity while giving attention to culturally appropriate materials (Losard and Notari-Syverson, 2001).

Making assessment meaningful for children involves using tools that are appropriate for the child to use (Copple and Bredekamp, 2006). This includes measures which allow for the full range of children's competencies to be recorded (Bagnato, 2007). Essentially, using measures that children are interested in is the best approach to assessment and will yield the most valid information (Copple and Bredekamp, 2006). Using informal measures that do not significantly interfere with children's normal environments and movements is most likely to reflect children's full capabilities and understandings (Copple and Bredekamp, 2006).

*Effective assessment uses multiple approaches that are appropriate for each child's competency*

Children learn and demonstrate their learning in many ways, and should therefore be observed using a variety of tools and approaches and in a variety of contexts (Gullo, 2005). The NAEYC (2009) states that assessment is most effective when multiple methods are used to gather reliable and appropriate information about a child's learning and development (NAEYC, 2009). There is wide consensus in the research literature that a variety of formal and informal assessment tools give early childhood professionals and families a comprehensive view of children's learning and development (Brown and Rolfe, 2005; Glazzard et al., 2010; Grisham-Brown et al., 2006; Wortham, 2008). Moreover, Rinaldi (2006) suggests that when educators and families combine their shared understandings, new understandings emerge that would not be possible from separate perspectives.

Hatch (2010) suggests that dynamic assessments enable effective assessment of young children. Dynamic assessment involves assessing what children are capable of doing independently as well as what they can do with the assistance of an adult. This creates a direct link between the teaching and assessment process (Hatch, 2010). With this in mind, assessments should be context and age appropriate, but they should also recognise the current capabilities (Gullo, 2005) and culture (Fleer, 2002) of each child. Copple and Bredekamp (2006) agree, stating that age appropriateness combined with assessments across different situations and settings are likely to ensure more effective assessment practice. Recognising the idiosyncratic nature of learning, Puckett and Black (2008) also suggest that children should only be compared to their own developmental trajectory rather than compared to the average behaviour for a group.

*Multiple that assessments occur over time and are holistic contribute to a complete picture of each child*

Assessment for learning and development needs to take place continually, in more than one activity or setting, in order to generate a more accurate picture of each child's abilities. This allows for the dynamic and ongoing nature of children's learning, but also recognises that children will behave in different ways, in different contexts and on different days (Sattler, 1998). By gathering data across a period of time, early childhood professionals gather a complete picture of each child's capabilities and record change and growth over time (Allen, 2007). By collecting these data as they occur over time, early childhood professionals can later apply their professional knowledge to analyse the evidence to create a detailed picture of the child's capabilities (Bagnato, 2007). From this rich source of evidence, professionals can make accurate inferences about each child's capabilities and their rate of learning and development. These inferences can serve to inform an evidence-based program that advances each child's learning and development.

Gullo (2005) states the need for continual and comprehensive (or holistic) assessment. Continual assessment occurs when children are assessed over time with the view of tracking their progress. Baldwin, Adams and Kelly (2009) highlight the importance of continual assessment for the purposes of making decisions about individual development, learning programs and further assessment. Copple and Bredekamp (2006) agree that ongoing assessment of children's progress is central to planning and helps early childhood professionals to know the children with whom they work.

Holistic assessment allows early childhood professionals to explore and assess the many aspects of children's learning and development in different contexts, environments and relationships. Holistic assessment enables professionals to

develop a strong picture of the child's learning and development across all outcome areas.

*Professionals take objective, non-judgemental and accurate assessments of children's learning and development*

To be effective in gathering evidence of children's learning and development, early childhood professionals need to be effective, accurate and informed observers (Mindes, 2003). It is important that the evidence collected through various forms of assessment reflects each child's abilities, and how they approach learning, as well as the outcomes of their efforts (Puckett and Black, 2008). Early childhood professionals, therefore, must be able to effectively observe children, choose the best method to record these observations and apply their professional expertise to interpret this evidence of learning and development (Mindes, 2003). The observation skills of early childhood professionals are essential in providing a base for a supported and responsive curriculum (Baldwin et al., 2009); this includes the ability to critically reflect on the methods of observation (MacNaughton, 2003).

## **Implications for achieving the best outcomes for children**

### **1. Early childhood professionals require the knowledge and skills to undertake non-judgemental assessment**

Although early childhood professionals, in particular educators, are experienced at taking observations of children, a more robust, systematic and objective style of assessment is called for within the VEYLDF. Early childhood professionals should access clear information on *what* and *when* to assess. Further, they need to develop skills in taking objective assessments through recording what children actually do, say, make write or draw, analysing the data and making informed inferences from this based on their professional knowledge and knowledge of the VEYLDF.

### **2. Assessment needs to be undertaken collaboratively with children, families and professionals**

Children are active participants in their own learning and co-construct knowledge with early childhood professionals. Families are experts in their own children and bring with them a great deal of insight into their children's strengths, abilities and interests. Embedding child and family perspectives of learning and developing into the assessment process is therefore essential for effective practice.

### **3. A culture of evidence-based practice decisions must be promoted**

Strong leadership within early childhood settings supports early childhood professionals to use analyse evidence of children's learning and development effectively and to draw clear inferences from it. Early childhood professionals need to be able to work collaboratively with their colleagues and other professionals who support children in order to develop a complete picture of each child and form a clear view about planning for development. They must also be supported to explain the assessment process to families, working collaboratively with them in the learning process.

### **4. Effective assessment is dynamic and ongoing, like children's learning and development**

Children's learning and development is dynamic and ongoing. Their behaviour, interests and capabilities vary with different people, different settings and on different days. Children experience periods of rapid growth and change, and they experience periods of consolidation where it may appear that little is happening. Assessment processes need to reflect the dynamism and ongoing nature of children's learning and development. This means that early childhood professionals document evidence of children's learning regularly, and when making inferences from the data, consider evidence collected from a range of settings using a range of assessment tools.

**5. A systematic and rigorous approach is needed to support systematic assessment of children's learning and development across services**

Early childhood professionals are experienced at collecting evidence of children's learning and development through anecdotal records such as observations, learning stories, and running records. Snow and van Hemel (2008), however, advocate for the application of a more systematic and rigorous form of assessing children's learning and development. This process would see children's learning and development being assessed across the services in which they participate, giving a more complete picture of their learning and developmental trajectory. This requires collaboration between early childhood professionals and a mutual acknowledgement of expertise and varying professional approaches to creating and using assessment for learning and development (Ashton et al., 2008).

## Methodology

This Paper is based on a review of national and international literature published over the last twenty years. Literature was obtained by using the University of Melbourne's on-line database. Where journal articles cited older references that appeared to be relevant to the topic at hand, these references were also investigated, whether primary or secondary research material. Also, longitudinal studies and theories of early childhood education were explored as their relevance became apparent through the research.

Peer reviewed ratings of "very good" and "excellent" were prioritised.

Databases searched:

A+ Education (Informit)

Web of Science

PsycINFO

Academic Search Premier (EBSCO)

ERIC (CSA)

Web of Science

JSTOR

Wiley Interscience Journals

The following search terms were used:

- assessment for learning and development
- assessment for teaching
- authentic assessment
- progress monitoring
- effective planning and programming
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The search terms were combined with the keywords 'early childhood' and 'children' to limit results to literature relevant to this paper.

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