



**Supporting learning and
development through
assessment**



Introduction

Assessment is part of adults’ day-to-day interactions with children. Adults continually make judgements about children’s learning and development and use the information they gather to help children to progress. Children too make judgements about what they are good at, what they enjoy doing, what they can do now with a little help, and what they would like to be able to do in the future.

These guidelines describe what assessment is and show what it can look like in early childhood. At times, specific references are made to infant classes in primary schools where assessment practice is informed by legislation.

What is assessment? Why is it important?

Figure 3: Definition of assessment

Assessment is the ongoing process of **collecting, documenting, reflecting on, and using** information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning.

Assessment enables the adult to find out what children understand, how they think, what they are able to do, and what their dispositions and interests are. This information helps the adult to build rich stories of children as capable and competent learners in order to support further learning and development. In doing this, he/she uses the assessment information to give on-going feedback to children about how they are getting on in their learning, to provide challenging and enjoyable experiences for them, to choose appropriate supports for them, and to document, celebrate and plan the next steps in their learning.

Put simply, the adult considers the following questions when thinking about assessment.

Table 11: Thinking about assessment

Element	Questions
Making a judgement	What aspects of children’s learning and development do I want to focus on in my assessment? Who will make the judgement - me, the children, or both of us?
Recording	How will I record the judgement—as a mental note, as a written note, as a comment or story, as a drawing, as a photograph or video-recording, on a checklist? How will I ensure that, over time, I am building up rich portraits of children’s learning and development? Will I give children opportunities to record their own judgements? How?
Sharing	What do I want to say to children about their learning and development? What do I want to share with children’s parents? How will I share the assessment information?



Assessment for Learning and **Assessment of Learning** are two approaches to assessment. The two differ in **how** the adult uses the information he/she collects. The main purpose of Assessment of Learning is to inform others, like parents and professionals, such as therapists, about children’s achievement. Assessment for Learning focuses on using assessment information to help children with the next steps in their learning and development. While both approaches are important, these guidelines focus on the adult using assessment on a daily basis to help children progress in their learning and development across *Aistear’s* four themes. This is Assessment for Learning.



‘Doing’ assessment

The four assessment actions — **collecting**, **documenting**, **reflecting on**, and **using** information — overlap and often happen at the same time. At times the adult uses all four actions at once and at other times undertakes just one or two. On occasions the adult assesses within a few seconds or minutes, but often assessment takes place over a number of days or weeks. Sometimes the adult assesses without even planning to. At other times, he/she plans to focus on particular aspects of learning and development across *Aistear’s* themes. Table 12 summarises some key features of good assessment practice.

Table 12: Features of good assessment practice

Assessment	The adult
Benefits children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ gives feedback to children on their learning and development as part of his/her daily interactions with them ■ makes decisions that build on past experiences and support new learning and development
Involves children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ talks with children to understand their learning and development ■ gives children opportunities to think about what they did, said, made, and learned, and helps them plan what they will do next
Makes sense for children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ assesses as part of everyday activities, events, routines, and interactions, and uses objects, places and people which are familiar and interesting to children
Involves children’s families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ provides parents with insights into their children’s learning and gives suggestions for how they might support learning at home ■ gives parents opportunities to share information about their children’s learning and development
Uses many methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ uses methods such as self-assessment, conversations, observations, tasks, and tests ■ uses methods in a way that is appropriate, given children’s ages, backgrounds and stages of learning and development
Happens over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ collects and uses information on a daily basis ■ over time, builds a rich portrait of each child as a learner
Celebrates the breadth and depth of children’s learning and development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ provides evidence of children’s learning and development across the dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge, and understanding as set out in <i>Aistear’s</i> themes.



What do I assess and when?

In assessing, the adult looks for evidence of children's progress across *Aistear's* themes:

- **dispositions:** for example curiosity, concentration, resilience, and perseverance
- **skills:** for example walking, cutting, writing, and problem-solving
- **attitudes and values:** for example respect for themselves and others, care for the environment, and positive attitudes to learning and to life
- **knowledge and understanding:** for example classifying objects using colour and size, learning 'rules' for interacting with others, finding out about people in their community, and understanding that words have meaning.

The adult focuses on what children do, make and say. For example, he/she might observe babies watching each other and initiating communication through a hand-touch or a screech, or toddlers working collaboratively to move and build a mound of stones, or young children investigating sounds as they create instruments from objects of different materials, shapes and sizes. The adult uses the aims and learning goals in *Aistear's* themes to interpret and build on these experiences. Collecting information over time is especially important with children from birth to six years as their learning and development does not follow neat patterns or happen at the same rate for each child.

Children also have developmental milestones, which health professionals check at certain times during early childhood. In addition, diagnostic assessments play an important role in helping to identify children with special educational needs. Although most practitioners do not carry out diagnostic assessments, they often notice early signs of potential difficulties and can bring their concerns to parents and help them get in touch with relevant professionals.

What information do I document, why and how?

Documentation provides a record of children's learning and development. This record helps to tell the story of children's journeys as capable and competent learners. The adult documents important points about what children understand, can do, and how they approach learning. He/she also sometimes records in more detail children's involvement in particular events or activities in order to create a fuller picture of the richness and complexity of their learning and development. This **storytelling approach** is especially useful in early childhood.

Documentation can include written notes, stories, photographs, video footage, and samples of what children make, do and say, such as models, sculptures, pictures, paintings, projects, scribed comments, responses, or statements. Adults and children use this evidence of learning to celebrate progress and achievement, and to plan the next steps in learning. Documentation also enables the adult and/or children to share information with parents. This can help parents to build on children's out-of-home experiences while at home, and so make learning more enjoyable and successful. In the case of some children, documentation provides critical information in helping to identify special educational needs, in putting appropriate supports in place, and in reviewing the impact of these interventions.

Deciding what to document

It is neither practical nor useful to record everything that the adult hears, sees and finds out. He/she decides what information is particularly helpful in showing and understanding children's progress in developing dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge, and understanding. The adult documents information on all children. In the case of some children, for example those who may have a learning difficulty or for whom the adult needs additional information to build a fuller picture of a specific aspect of learning, he/she records information more frequently. Sometimes, the adult records detailed information and at other times less detailed information. Drawing on professional expertise, he/she decides how much and how often. The important point is that documentation informs the adult's work with all children in the setting in a manageable way.

**Deciding how to document**

Table 13 describes different types of documentation. Examples are included in *learning experiences* 57-74.

Table 13: Documenting children’s learning and development

Documentation type	Resources, method and age group
Samples of children’s work	<p><i>Resources:</i> children’s work</p> <p><i>Method:</i> The adult stores samples of children’s work. Sometimes the children choose the samples, sometimes the adult decides what is chosen, and, at other times, the children and adult choose together.</p> <p><i>Age group:</i> six months to six years</p>
Notes	<p><i>Resources:</i> notebook, post-its, computer with word-processing package</p> <p><i>Method:</i> The adult makes brief notes, often consisting of just key words, about a particular event, activity or task. Sometimes the notes may be longer, giving details about a particular aspect of the child’s learning. The notes may focus on an individual child or a group of children. Over time, the notes tell a story of what the children do, say and understand.</p> <p><i>Age group:</i> birth to six years</p>
ICT: photographs and video or audio records	<p><i>Resources:</i> camera, video recorder, audio recorder, tapes</p> <p><i>Method:</i> The adult uses the camera or video or audio recorder to capture moments in children’s learning and development. Each photograph and video or audio clip helps tell a story. A collection created over time can show the children’s progress and achievements. A series of photographs can be taken on one day to show the child’s progress in a particular activity.</p> <p><i>Age group:</i> birth to six years (with written prior parental consent)</p>
Stories	<p><i>Resources:</i> notebook, post-its, computer with word-processing package</p> <p><i>Method:</i> The adult makes brief notes about children’s involvement in a particular event, activity or task. The notes may focus on an individual child’s contribution or the contributions of a group of children. In contrast to notes, this type of documentation gives more detailed information about children’s interactions with others, as well as the relevant objects and places, in sequence. These stories help the adult to see and understand better the progress children are making in relation to <i>Aistear’s</i> dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge, and understanding. Samples of children’s work and photographs can enrich the stories.</p> <p><i>Age group:</i> birth to six years</p>
Daily diaries or records of care	<p><i>Resources:</i> notebook, folder, computer with word-processing package</p> <p><i>Method:</i> The adult (often the Key Worker) makes brief notes each day about a child’s routines and responses, for example what the child ate, how much he/she slept, his/her nappy changes, and different interactions and activities. Based on behaviour, body language and verbal feedback from children, the adult may also note particular things the child likes, prefers and achieves. The diary or record is shared with parents by sending it home. Parents can be invited to comment and provide information on things that their children enjoy as well as things they find difficult.</p> <p><i>Age group:</i> birth to three years, and up to six years for children with special educational needs</p>



<p>Checklists</p>	<p><i>Resources:</i> pre-prepared checklists</p> <p><i>Method:</i> The adult uses checklists to record information about particular aspects of children’s learning, usually at the end of a given period of time. The adult makes judgements against predetermined descriptions. These might focus, for example, on physical interaction or early literacy skills. The adult usually ticks a heading which best describes the children’s progress to date.</p> <p><i>Age group:</i> birth to six years</p>
<p>Reports</p>	<p><i>Resources:</i> templates for reports</p> <p><i>Method:</i> The adult uses information from a range of assessment methods and documentation to develop reports on children’s learning and development. He/she shares these reports with parents. As the reports focus on a summary of children’s progress and achievement, they are developed at particular times in the year, for example in the summer when the child has completed a year in the setting.</p> <p>In the case of some children, the adult may receive a report from another professional, such as a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, a play therapist, or a physiotherapist. The adult uses these reports to further inform his/her work with the children.</p> <p><i>Age group:</i> birth to six years (Reports are usually used for children with special educational needs and for children at primary school.)</p>

How do I store assessment information and for how long?

Assessment information can be stored in children’s learning portfolios, in a practitioner’s files, and in central files³.

Children’s learning portfolios

A portfolio is a helpful way of compiling information about children’s learning and development. The portfolio can take the form of a folder, a scrapbook, a shoe, cereal or pizza box, or something similar in which objects made by the children, photographs, stories, notes, records of care, checklists, and test scores (where relevant), are kept. This collection tells the story of each child’s learning journey—his/her efforts, progress and achievement over time.

Portfolios can help give children a sense of pride in and ownership of their own learning and development. For example, children can select work samples and photographs for their portfolios, reflect on these, and, with the adult’s help, plan ahead. This experience can make learning more enjoyable and interesting for them.

Practitioner’s file

Practitioners working in out-of-home settings can keep a file which includes a record for each child in their group or class. This record might include details of observations, conversations with children and their parents, events, and incidents as they occur in the setting. The practitioner adds to this record as necessary. In this way, it is a ‘running record’.

Central files

Certain information about children needs to be kept in a central file in out-of-home settings. This might include parents’ names and contact details, medical information, reports and information from other professionals such as therapists, and so on. In the case of settings in which there are a number of practitioners, it might be especially important for this type of information to be accessible in a central

³ See standard 15 in *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006), which states that ‘being compliant requires that all relevant regulations and legislative requirements are met or exceeded’. In the case of infant teachers in primary schools, further information on recording and storing assessment information is available in the document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (2007).



location. Where children attend a setting for more than one year, the adult can transfer important points of information about children's learning and development from the practitioner's file to this central file at the end of a year or other period of time.

Assessment information gathered within the setting and by other professionals (for example, reports received from a therapist) should be stored safely and used only by those concerned with children's learning and development. It is also important that the information is used only for the purpose for which it was collected and documented. Information can be stored using a structured, manual filing system, and/or electronically. Where electronic records are kept, the adult can include photographs of items made by children.

Each setting decides for how long assessment information will be stored. In the case of primary schools, it is advisable to store relevant information until children reach their twenty-first birthday⁴.

How do I use the information I collect and document?

Thinking about what to do, how to do it and why, and then judging how well it went is part of any professional's work. The reflective adult uses information about children's learning and development to think about his/her practice, and to identify how to improve it. He/she may do this in partnership with colleagues and/or other professionals. This reflection may result in the adult changing the way he/she interacts with children and their parents, re-organising the room, changing routines, planning particular activities, and providing specific materials and objects. The adult also shares assessment information with the children and their parents and uses the information to plan for children's progress.

Supporting children with special educational needs

Assessment information can alert the adult to potential difficulties experienced by children. By bringing concerns to the attention of parents and other professionals, the adult plays a critical role in helping to access appropriate supports to enable children to progress in their learning and to limit the potential impact of the disability or difficulty on future learning and development. The supports may include putting a specific learning programme in place for a child. This might be based on an Individual Education Plan (IEP)⁵.

The IEP is a comprehensive working document setting out prioritised learning needs, goals and strategies to support a child's learning and to map his/her progress. The plan is usually developed by the practitioner and the child's parents. Therapists and Special Educational Needs Organisers often contribute too. Detailed information on how to develop and use IEPs is provided by the National Council for Special Education at www.ncse.ie.

With whom do I share information and how?

By talking regularly to children about their learning and development, they can decide with the adult what they should do next and how. Sharing information with parents is equally important⁶, so that they can support their children at home and, where necessary, work with the setting to organise additional supports for their children. In some cases, where a concern exists about learning and development, the adult may advise parents to get a referral letter from their doctor in order to have the child assessed. In the case of some children, and with parental consent, the adult shares assessment information with others such as therapists, Special Educational Needs Organisers and inspectors in order to access specific supports and/or resources.



⁴ Assessment information can be requested from schools by parents, or by children themselves on reaching their eighteenth birthday under the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003).

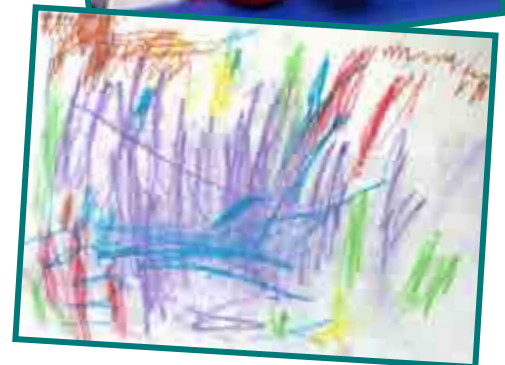
⁵ The use of IEPs as outlined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN, 2004) is not yet enacted, and is therefore not currently a requirement of educational settings.

⁶ In the case of primary school settings, the Education Act (1998) and the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003) outline parents' rights to regular information on their children's progress and achievement.



Much information is shared between settings and parents informally and regularly, for example when parents are dropping and collecting children from the setting. It is also important to give parents specific time to discuss how their children are getting on. This can be done by meeting parents at times that suit them. Different arrangements work for different settings and parents. This meeting can be especially important for children whose parents don't bring them to and from the setting. At other times, it can be helpful to meet parents as a group, for example before children join the setting and a short time after they have joined. Other events, at which information can be shared, include open days, children's shows and concerts, and arrangements for parents to spend time in the setting to support activities such as arts, music and reading stories (see the guidelines, *Building partnerships between parents and practitioners*). Some settings may have a staff member with responsibility for liaising with parents. This work might involve keeping in contact through regular phone calls and home visits, as well as meetings in the setting.

It is also helpful to give parents information in writing. For example, parents might get a *daily diary* or *record of care* for their child. This can be especially useful in the case of babies and toddlers, and young children with special educational needs. Practitioners might also give a report to parents at specific times in the year, such as Christmas and/or summer⁷. (See www.ncca.ie/primary/assessment for a range of report card templates for use in primary schools.) The report usually summarises the child's progress and achievement in learning over a particular period of time. Children can play a role in creating the report. If they are to be useful to parents, reports should be written in language that is easily understood. It may be helpful for staff to develop a guide to sharing information with parents. The guide could offer advice and suggestions about when to hold meetings, how much time to give to them, what information to share, what terminology to use, and tips for supporting parents in their role as educators⁸. Talking to parents about what types of information might be helpful to them, and how they would like this given to them, can also be useful to staff when making decisions about sharing written information with parents.



What information should I gather from parents?

Just as it is important to share assessment information with parents, it is also important that parents share information with practitioners⁹. Some parents may need assistance with this, for example parents whose first language is neither English nor Irish, or parents who may not feel confident in meeting practitioners, or who, perhaps, may feel uncomfortable with the idea of assessment, given the young age of their children. It is important to help parents understand what assessment in early childhood is, its role in building rich stories of what and how their children learn and develop, and its use in helping them to progress. This can help parents to see the important part they can play in helping their children to learn and develop.

⁷ Primary school teachers report assessment information twice during each school year. One of these should include a written report, preferably at the end of the school year. The other can include a meeting or a meeting and a written report (NCCA, 2007). Outside these meetings, teachers may also meet parents informally.

⁸ The NCCA developed a DVD for parents on the *Primary School Curriculum*. This DVD, *The What, Why and How of children's learning in primary school* (2006) contains information on early learning and on learning in junior and senior infants. The DVD, together with information leaflets and tip sheets for parents, is available on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie.

⁹ See the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 Explanatory Note: Regulation 13, which sets out the minimum information that must be kept regarding children attending a pre-school service.



Information might be shared during a telephone conversation or at a meeting between the parents and the practitioner before the child starts in a setting. Alternatively, parents might be asked to complete a form. Whatever strategy is used, the practitioner invites the parents to share information about the child's

- family - name, address, place in family, number of siblings, mother tongue
- medical history - gestation period, complications at birth, illnesses, vaccinations, allergies, medication¹⁰, disabilities, areas of concern
- early learning and developmental milestones - at what age children sat, said first words and sentences, crawled, walked, were toilet trained
- personality - likes and dislikes, strengths and challenges
- special comfort items, for example a blanket or a teddy
- special names for family or familiar items, for example what they call parents, their soother and so on
- social interactions and relationships
- previous experiences in out-of-home settings
- any other information that may be relevant.

When an adult is concerned about a child's progress it may be necessary to gather more information from the parents, for example the family history in language or social development.



Thinking about my practice

1. *How do I collect information on children's learning and development across Aistear's four themes? To what extent is my practice giving me rich portraits of each child's learning?*
2. *What do I do with assessment information? Is the information I document proving useful? How can I make it more useful?*
3. *How frequently do I talk to children about the progress they are making?*
4. *How frequently do I share information with parents? How and when do I do this?*
5. *How do I balance information on children's successes and achievements with things they find challenging when I'm talking to parents?*
6. *What strategies could I use to involve parents more in contributing to the portrait of their child's learning?*

How do I collect assessment information?

The adult uses different methods to collect information about the progress children are making in their learning and development. He/she decides which method is appropriate depending on the child who is being assessed, and what aspects of learning and development are being focused on and why. In choosing methods, the adult is mindful of children's backgrounds, cultures, family contexts and values, languages, abilities, interests, and areas requiring extra support. He/she builds a good relationship with the children and watches for signs that might suggest that the assessment should stop for now, and recommence possibly tomorrow or in a few days.

¹⁰ Parents are asked to sign indemnity forms where children are to be given medication in out-of-home settings.



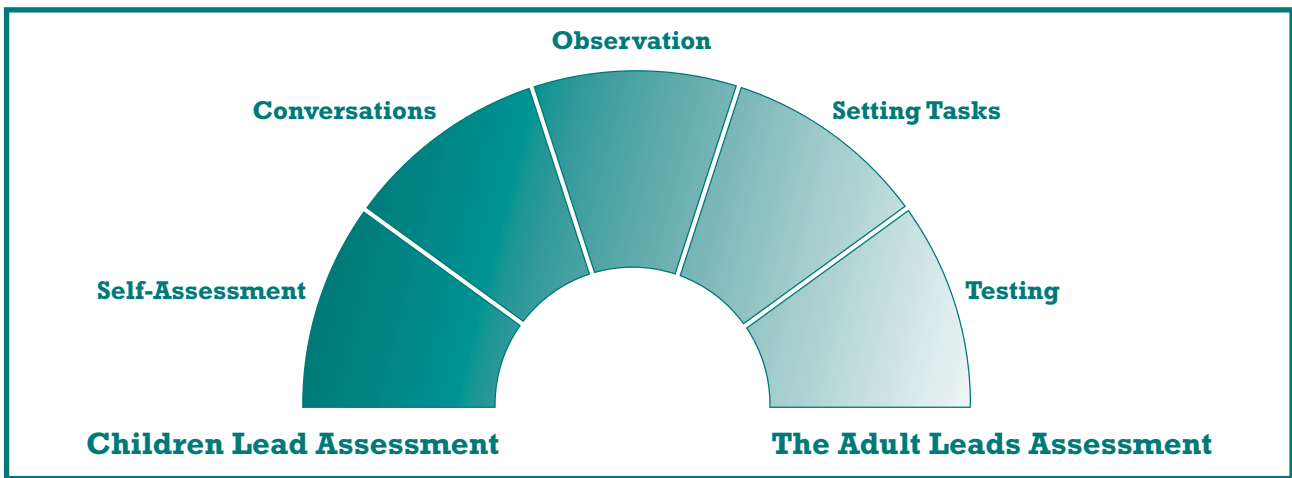
Ethical considerations

Assessment, perhaps more than any other part of early childhood practice, highlights the importance of ethics. Given the young age of the children, the adult has a responsibility to be open to the messages children are giving through their facial expressions, body movements, vocalisations, and words. He/she needs to give plenty of time to assessment in order to capture the breadth and depth of children’s learning and development. An increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population of children in out-of-home settings means that, in many cases, practitioners and children may have different cultural perspectives. In addition, for many children the language of the setting may not be the language spoken in their home. In these instances the adult uses his/her knowledge of how children learn first and second languages, and how these experiences shape how they learn to think, in order to make judgements about children’s progress. For these children, it is especially important that their parents have opportunities to share information with the setting so that the children’s portraits as young learners accurately reflect their strengths, interests and needs.

Five assessment methods

Figure 4 presents five methods¹¹. These include self-assessment and conversations in which children take the lead in making judgements about their own progress as learners. Observations, setting tasks, and testing involve the adult leading the assessment¹². While these guidelines present the methods individually, each method often involves using other methods too. A combination of methods helps the adult build richer and more authentic portraits of children as learners.

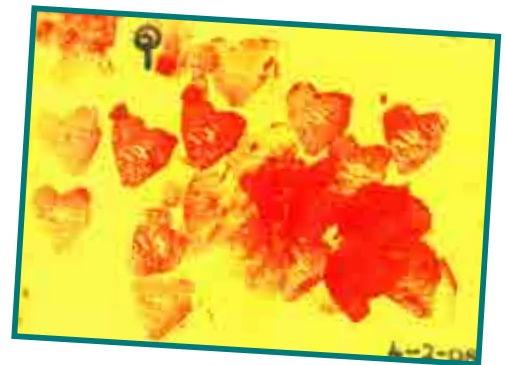
Figure 4: Assessment methods



Pages 81 to 101 describe each method by answering three questions:

- What is this method?
- How do I use it?
- With what age group of children can I use it?

Learning experiences 57-74 show the methods in action across different types of settings and with children of different ages.



¹¹ Rather than presenting assessment methods in order of frequency of use starting with observations and conversations, the guidelines use a sequence which reflects sociocultural theory. This sequence prioritises children having opportunities to lead the assessment process.

¹² The guidelines highlight these five methods given their usefulness in assessing early learning and development. By comparison, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007) presents eight assessment methods. Some of the 'extra' three methods are subsumed within the five presented in these guidelines.



Self-assessment

What is self-assessment?

Self-assessment involves children thinking about their own learning and development. Children do this as part of how they learn, and often they are the best assessors of what they have done and achieved. Over time, they are better able to think about what they did, said or made, and to make decisions about how they might do better next time. This helps them to set personal goals and to work towards these goals together as a group or individually.

How do I help children to self-assess?

Children need time to develop self-assessment skills. The adult plays a key role by spending time with them individually, in pairs or in groups, and revisiting the activities and events they were involved in. Using prompts, the adult guides children's thinking as they talk about their experiences. Helpful prompts include:

- *What did you do when ...?*
- *How did you do that? What did you use?*
- *What happened then? Why do you think it happened?*
- *I wonder what would have happened if ...*
- *I wonder how we could ...*
- *What would you like to do next (time)? How will you do that?*
- *You might like to do it with Trevor.*
- *I'm wondering what you were thinking when ...?*
- *What was easy about this work?*
- *What was difficult about the work?*
- *Are you happy with ...?*
- *What did you learn from that?*
- *What would you do differently if you were doing it again?*
- *What would help you to do better ...?*



At other times, the adult might invite children to talk about samples of their work. These might include constructions, drawings, dressing-up outfits, paintings, puzzles, sculptures, or writing. Alternatively, the adult might use photographs of these to start a discussion. As part of the discussion the adult might provide words and phrases to help children develop a language which they can use when talking about what they did, said or made, felt, and learned.

Collections of things children have made and/or photographs can help them connect past learning and new learning. This in turn can help them identify what they are good at, where they can improve, and what new learning they would like to do. This is the basis for setting learning goals for themselves.

With what age group of children can I use self-assessment?

Self-assessment can be used with toddlers and young children. Babies too can sometimes use it as can be seen in the next learning experience.

**Learning experience 57: Look Mia, I did it too!****Theme: Well-being, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Babies****Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)**

Mia (13 months) and Josh (11 months) are playing side by side on the floor. Taking turns, they lift objects including wooden spoons, colanders and lids, show them to each other, and screech with glee. Mia notices a small chair close by and speedily crawls to it. Pulling herself to her feet she grabs the back of the chair and pulls herself onto the seat. She smiles, screeches and claps her hands in delight at her accomplishment. Not wanting to be left out, Josh slides on his bottom to the chair. Wanting a turn at sitting on the chair, he shouts loudly at Mia and waves his arms. The two babies become upset—Mia not wanting to leave the chair and Josh wanting to sit on it. Their shouting gets louder. Deirdre, their Key Worker, has been observing from a distance and joins them. She places a second chair close to Mia's. Josh makes his way to it and grabbing the back of the chair, pulls himself to his feet and tries to get onto the seat. He falls back to the floor. He pulls himself to his feet again only to fall once more. Deirdre observes from a distance and offers gentle encouragement to Josh: *You can do it, I know you can.* Screeching a little, he pulls himself to his feet a third time. He looks carefully at the seat and noticing the handles, grasps these and pulls himself onto the seat. Delighted, he looks towards Deirdre and Mia screeching loudly and bouncing on his seat.



Reflection: Do I give children opportunities to set and pursue their own learning goals?

Learning experience 58: The winning tower**Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 3 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Toddlers****Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)**

Patrick, Zyta and Johnny (each almost 3 years) are making a big tower. They talk to Aileen, the playgroup leader, about it and occasionally invite her to add a block or two to their construction while warning her to be careful! Johnny explains that they made it because he and Patrick (cousins) stayed in a big hotel on their holidays that was like a tower. *It's 'normous (enormous) tower, isn't it, and we made it all by ourselves.* Patrick notes looking at Aileen. Zyta draws Aileen's attention to the coloured blocks they used in the tower and comments: *It's got loads o' (of) colours like red and green and orange and ... and it could win a big medal.* Johnny adds, *We did good job.* Aileen suggests she could photograph the children with their tower. Using the digital camera, computer and printer, Aileen makes three copies of the photograph, and offers the children the opportunity to include them in their portfolios. Alongside the photograph, she writes each child's comment about the tower. The children tell Aileen that they'd like to add the photographs and comments to their learning portfolios. Meanwhile, Aileen makes some notes in her practitioner's file about each child's concentration to detail in building the tower and their ability to work together.

Through previous observations and conversations with Zyta, Aileen knows she is competitive and likes to be 'the best'. While Zyta's reference to getting a medal here reinforces this assessment, Aileen records how working collaboratively with Patrick and Johnny seemed to lessen her wish for Aileen to comment on how 'good' the tower was and what a great job she had done in building it. Aileen makes a note on her weekly plan to create more opportunities for co-operative learning for Zyta.



Reflection: Do I create a climate in which children feel confident to make decisions about what should go in their learning portfolios?



Learning experience 59: Autumn pictures

Theme: *Exploring and thinking*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

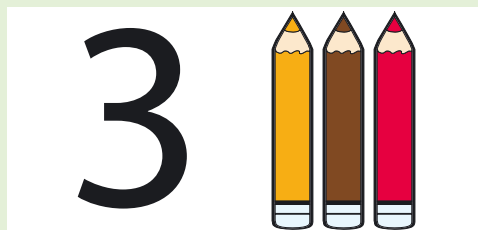
Ms. O'Connor, the senior infant teacher, notes that Val (5 years and 9 months) tends to contribute to class or group discussions only very occasionally. He has a stammer and his teacher is concerned that he may be becoming increasingly self-conscious about speaking in front of his peers.

As part of their work on autumn, the children are making pictures using leaf rubbings. Ms. O'Connor and the children talk about WILFs (What I am looking for) for their pictures which Ms. O'Connor writes on the blackboard. She draws pictures beside them to help the children read the WILF.

I did two leaf rubbings.



I used three autumn colours in my picture.



Since September, Ms. O'Connor has met with Val's parents on two occasions to talk about the approaches they use to help Val with his speech. They put her in touch with his speech therapist. Using strategies suggested by the therapist, she tries to give a few minutes of one-to-one attention to Val each day. One of the strategies she uses is to speak slowly to him while she acts as a role model helping him to slow his speech down. This helps Val in overcoming his stammer.

Today, while the children are doing their leaf rubbings, Ms. O'Connor kneels at Val's group and talks to him and the other children in the group about their pictures. She asks Val what he found easy and difficult in the activity, and what he is happy with in his picture. She comments on the colours he has used and the shapes of the leaves. She notes that asking Val questions seems to make him anxious, and in turn his stammer becomes more pronounced. He seems more comfortable when she uses a conversational approach, making comments to which Val can respond if he likes. Noticing this, she asks few questions and instead uses phrases and comments which invite Val to talk to her about his work using key words and phrases, such as autumn colours, reds and oranges, jagged edges, and gives Val's lots of opportunities to use these. The children want to use their leaf rubbings to create a large autumn picture outside their classroom door for their parents and the principal to see. As part of this, Ms. O'Connor plans to model using the autumn words and phrases for Val again and to give him small group opportunities to use these.

Ms. O'Connor makes the following notes in Val's record in her practitioner's file.

Val	30/09/08	Uses good pronunciation of autumn words and phrases when he speaks slowly and in small groups.
	Next steps	Comment on what Val is doing as a way of inviting him to talk.



Reflection: Am I open to 'messages' from children about how best to support them in their learning?



Conversations

What are conversations?

Adults and children, and children and children, talk to each other about what they are doing and thinking. These conversations complement all other assessment methods. For example, observations can alert the adult to a particular aspect of children's learning and development while follow-on conversations can give the adult a better understanding of what children can do or understand. Most conversations just happen while some are planned.



How do I use conversations for assessment?

The adult uses a variety of strategies to invite children into conversations. These include

- thinking aloud, for example, *I think I'll have to find another way to...*
- talking about what children are thinking, for example, *Have you any ideas?*
- reflecting back to children what they say or do
- responding to what children say by making comments, for example, *I love the seaside too*
- remaining silent while children think and then make a response
- agreeing or disagreeing
- expressing an opinion
- asking a question.



The adult uses a combination of these on a daily basis to find out what children are doing and why, to encourage them to share what they are thinking and feeling, and to help them to think imaginatively and creatively. He/she can use a photograph, a video-clip, a play moment, or samples of work to focus children. Using their responses, the adult gives feedback to the children and guides them in their learning. Children can also use these strategies. For example, they may question each other and/or the adult. The adult can help them to use questions to support their own learning by modelling good questioning and by giving them time and opportunities to ask questions.

The adult uses two types of questions:

- **Open questions** can have many answers which can be short or long. These questions can often consist of just one or two words such as *why?* *who?* and *what for?* The adult can use these questions to invite children to think about reasons, possibilities, opportunities, and solutions. Open questions can encourage children to be imaginative and creative in their thinking and to use more complex language.
- **Closed questions** usually require one short answer. Sometimes these questions have a single correct answer such as, *What did Jasper have for his breakfast?* and at other times they have a yes or no answer such as, *Did you like digging the tunnel?* The adult can use closed questions to find out what children have understood after taking part in an activity or event to help children recall and sequence events, or as a stimulus for discussion.

For more information on using questions, see *Assisting children's thinking* in the guidelines, *Learning and developing through interactions*.

With what age group of children can I use conversations?

Conversations can be used with babies, toddlers and young children. If children are not yet able to communicate effectively with language the adult interprets their attempts to talk and their non-verbal reactions.

**Learning experience 60: Number chats****Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 3 and Learning goal 2****Age group: Babies, toddlers and young children****Setting: Childminding**

Bernie, a childminder, looks after Jack (16 months), Sorcha (3 years) and Rhiannon (5 years) in her home. Bernie plans lots of activities for the week to build on some of what Sorcha has been doing in playgroup, and Rhiannon in school.

On Monday they all go for a walk to the shops. On the way they count the red cars parked along the street; Rhiannon and Sorcha look for 1, 2 and 3 on car number plates (Rhiannon does this for 4, 5 and 6 too). Rhiannon spots numbers on houses and shop doors. They identify these and Bernie explains their purpose. They reach the post box. Sorcha and Rhiannon each take a letter for posting and Rhiannon notices a 5 on the stamp. They ask Bernie what the number is and she explains about the cost of the stamp. Bernie makes sure Jack is included by drawing his attention to things. From time to time she kneels beside Jack in his pushchair and points to and describes things around him.

On Wednesday Bernie bakes with the children. Jack sits at the table in his highchair and the girls sit on chairs in their aprons. They are making top hats. Bernie gives Jack a dish of softened fruit and a spoon for him to mix and eat while she and the girls count out bun cases, making sure there is one for each person and their mam, dad and siblings. *How do we make these buns, Bernie?*, enquires Rhiannon. Bernie explains. She adds the melted chocolate and the girls put a marshmallow in each case followed by a small strawberry, which they picked in Bernie's garden that morning.

On other days they look for numbers in the kitchen, for example on the washing machine dials, on food packets, and in story books. *2! What that for?*, asks Sorcha as she and Rhiannon help Bernie load clothes in the washing machine and set the correct cycle. Bernie describes these experiences to Jack and involves him in the conversations. The children also help Bernie in her day-to-day activities in caring for the house and Bernie talks to them about how and what they are learning through these hands-on experiences.



Reflection: Do I encourage children to ask me questions as part of their conversations with me?

Learning experience 61: Afraid of the dark**Theme: Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1****Age group: Toddlers****Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)**

Kathleen, the playgroup leader, reads the story of *Can't You Sleep Little Bear* (Martin Waddell) to the nine children in the group (between 2½ and 3 years). Kathleen talks to them about the story. She uses a number of strategies to encourage them to talk, including thinking aloud with them. Kathleen notices that Killian who is usually talkative is quiet. After the discussion she talks to him. Killian becomes teary-eyed. She gently encourages him to share why he is feeling sad: *I see you're sad at the moment Killian. I wonder why.* Kathleen learns that he is worried about Little Bear in the story because he might be afraid again the next night.

Killian: *I no like dark. It scary.*

Kathleen: (Offers comfort and a listening ear.) *It can be scary yes. That's why Big Bear put a big light in Little Bear's room, and then showed him the moonlight. Does your ma or da do something like that for you?*



Killian: I have light in my room but still scary.

Kathleen: *Remember what Little Bear did when he was scared in the story? He told his daddy. Perhaps, if you feel scared you could tell your ma or da. Would that be a good idea?*

Killian nods in agreement.

The following day, using the story, *Can't You Sleep Little Bear*, Kathleen explores the feeling of being scared with the children. She asks them to think about times when they felt a little bit frightened. Many of the children tell stories about getting lost in the shop, losing their favourite toy and thinking they might not find it again, and hearing a scary noise. Killian shares his story of being scared in the dark like Little Bear. Other children agree about the dark making them feel frightened. They talk about things they can do to help when they feel scared, such as telling a parent or grandparent, keeping a flash lamp under the bed in case the electricity doesn't work, and words they can use to help them describe how they feel. Later, they learn about animals who love the dark. A few weeks later Killian informs Kathleen, *I love dark now!*

Kathleen makes notes in her file about Killian's fear of the dark and the progress he makes over the coming weeks in exploring this emotion. She does likewise for the other children.



Reflection: How can I help children share their experiences and feelings in a way that is appropriate for their stage of development?

Learning experience 62: Tapping into an interest

Theme: Exploring and thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

The junior infant children have been on a trip to an open farm. They have lots of photographs and Mr Shaw their teacher is using these to help them recall the experience, and to find out what they enjoyed and what they learned. He is working with a group of twelve children, while six children are playing in the farm corner and the other six are building a veterinary practice using small world toys and play-dough. The children talk about sitting beside their friends on the bus, eating lunch outside, wearing their wellies, feeding the lambs, holding fluffy chicks, and seeing the baby calves drinking from their mothers' udders. Then one child notes: *The man told us that the donkey pulls a cart.* Another child adds: *That's 'cos (because) they don't have much tractors on that farm and that's what you do if you can't get a tractor. My granda told me that.* Another comments: *The man at the farm said there are not many donkeys left but my granda has hundreds.* Mr Shaw encourages and assists the children to move beyond description and to hypothesise, imagine and speculate. He does this by using phrases such as, *I wonder what was on the carts the donkey pulled. Suppose the farmer needed to plant more crops, I'm not sure how he would do that if he didn't have tractors. I wonder how the donkey might feel after his work on the farm.* The children enter into a conversation about what life on a farm might have been like for their grandparents. When Mr Shaw poses the question, *How could we find out?*, one little girl suggests asking them. This conversation heralds a class project on farm life when my granny and granda were young. In engaging with the project the children interview grandparents, look at old photographs, see, touch and find out about 'old' farm implements, learn farm songs, and build an 'old' farm with small world and construction toys. Throughout the project, the children learn new farm language and how farm life has changed since their grandparents were young, which helps them develop a sense of time.



Reflection: Are children's conversations and interests a focus for further learning in my setting?

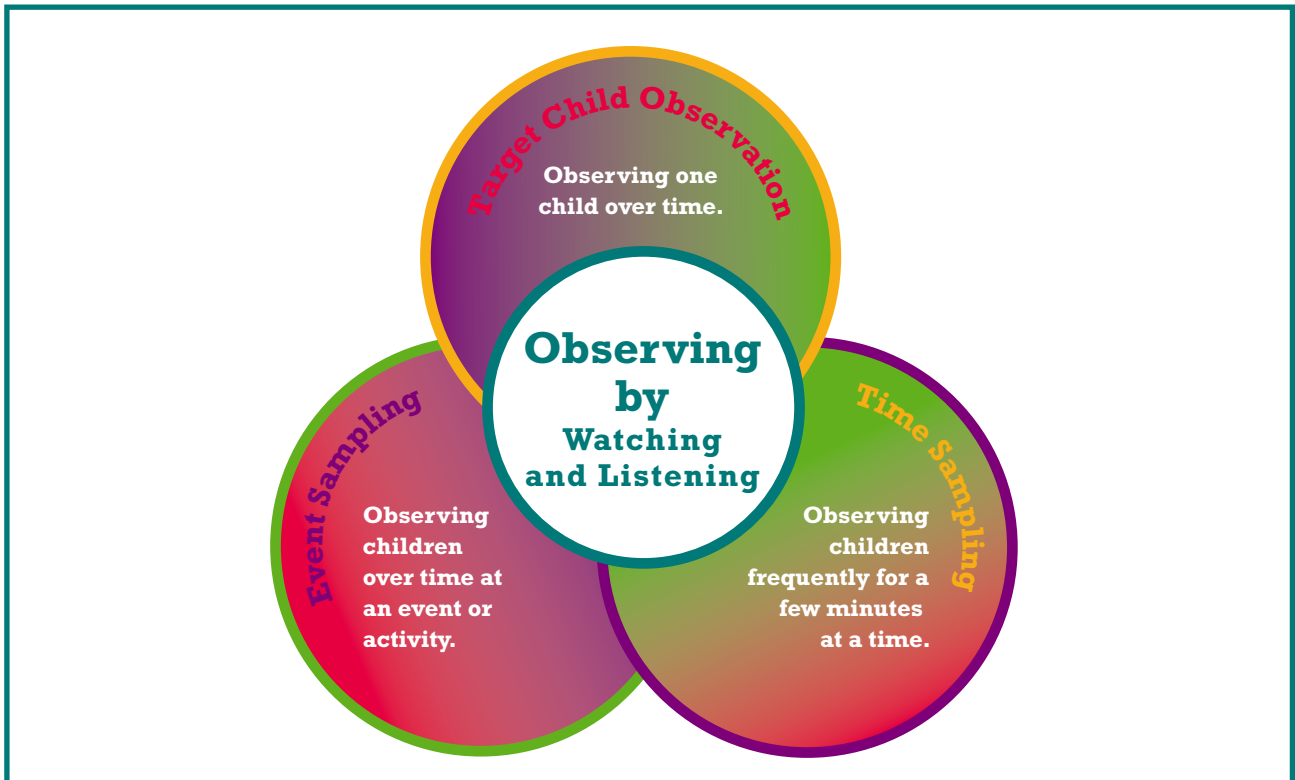


Observation

What is observation?

Observation involves watching and listening to children and using the information gathered through this to enhance their learning and development. The adult may use different types of observations depending on what he/she wants to find out. (See Figure 5.) Like conversations, observations can be planned or spontaneous and are best carried out by an adult who knows the children well.

Figure 5: Types of observation



How do I carry out observations?

Most observations are unplanned and happen during routines, discussions, activities, and events in the setting. While spontaneous observations can provide the adult with valuable information, planned observations can add more detail about what and how children are learning.

Through planned observations the adult focuses on children's facial expressions, gestures, body language, vocalisations, spoken words, actions, and their creations such as art, dance, music and song, pictures, and writing. Recording everything that the adult sees and hears is neither possible nor necessary. He/she decides what information is most important at any particular time in building a portrait of children's learning, and records this. Sometimes the adult makes short notes. At other times, he/she may make more detailed notes which can be used to tell the story of the involvement of an individual child or a group of children in a particular activity, task or play scenario. (See learning experience 65.) In the case of on-the-spot observations, often called anecdotal snapshots, the adult can, perhaps, write key words or phrases in a notebook, or on a piece of paper or stick-it, and, later, at a quiet time can use these to make notes in the children's portfolios. He/she may also take a photograph or make a short video-clip as a record. When working with children under six years of age it is important that the adult gives time and space to children to 'show' their learning and development.



With what age group of children can I use observation?

Observation can be used with babies, toddlers and young children. It is especially helpful with children who rely on non-verbal or preverbal communication.

Learning experience 63: I want that cube

Theme: *Well-being, Aim 4 and Learning goal 2*

Age group: Babies

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Miriam, the crèche room leader, is encouraging Liam (10 months) to crawl. She knows he can do it as his mum has told Miriam about him crawling at home. For some reason he rarely crawls while in the crèche. Miriam places the sorting cube, that Liam loves to play with, out of his reach. It is near him although he will have to move closer to get it. Within a few seconds he shows his frustration as he yells and shakes his hands. He looks at Miriam as he yells louder. Miriam crawls to the toy and encourages him to crawl too: *Let's crawl together, will we?* She places the cube a little closer to him, all the time modelling crawling and encouraging Liam to have a go. He loses interest and picks up a spoon close by and bangs the floor with it. After lunch, as Miriam plays with another baby in the room, she observes Liam making one or two false starts at crawling. She moves a little closer so she can observe him better. He moves onto all fours and reaches forward while balancing himself with the other hand to grab the cube. Eventually, he makes it and Miriam claps her hands as he reaches the cube. Meanwhile, Lisa, the room assistant, recorded the achievement on video while Miriam observed and stayed ready to assist Liam if necessary. Miriam claps hands and congratulates Liam on his achievement. Liam claps too and laughs loudly. He proceeds to play with the cube. Miriam shares the footage on the video recorder with Liam's parents that evening and notes his achievement in his Record of Care. Over the coming days Miriam provides lots of opportunities that encourage Liam to crawl, and by the end of the following week he is delighted with his new mobility and the options for exploration that it brings!



Reflection: How can I use observations to greater effect in supporting and encouraging children to set their own learning goals?

Learning experience 64: Pilots are boys!

Themes: *Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1*

Age group: Toddlers and young children

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

Amy, Fionnán, Colm, and Róisín (between 2 years and 11 months and 4 years and 3 months) are playing outside. They are pretending they are going to France on an aeroplane. The playgroup leader, Joan, is recording their play using the video camera. Áine, the playgroup assistant, is playing with some of the other children and also keeping an eye on the play that is developing between Colm and the others. The children have arranged a number of props to set up the plane and now they are deciding roles. Colm is very clear that he is going to be the pilot and Fionnán is to be his assistant in the cockpit. Colm explains that the two girls can be air-hostesses, giving out the drinks and showing people what to do in an emergency.

Amy and Róisín are not happy with the roles they have been given. Amy wants to be a pilot too.

Colm: *Girls can't be pilots!*

Róisín and Amy: *Yes they can.*



Colm: You are the air-hostess and you help the people on the plane. Right? Pilots are boys. So, me and Fionnán have to be the pilots who fly. (Fionnán nods his head in agreement.)

Amy: We can be girl pilots. I'm not playing.

Amy storms off.

Róisín: Girls can be pilots if they want. Róisín pushes Colm and he pushes her back. Both children start to cry. Observing at a distance, Áine joins them and asks the children what happened. Amy notices this and comes back to join the group.

Róisín: Colm says girls can't be pilots.

Colm: Pilots are boys and she pushed me.

Róisín: He pushed me too.

Áine: **Now guys you know there's no hurting each other here, don't you? I get really upset when I hear you are being unkind to each other. Let's see if we can sort out this problem. You all want to be pilots, is that right?**

Amy, Fionnán, Colm, and Róisín nod their heads in agreement.

Áine: **I went on my holidays to America last year and the pilot was a girl so I know that girls can be pilots too. We know that boys and girls can do lots of different jobs. Remember the story about Rosie the truck driver who took her truck to buy food for her neighbour's cows? Or what about Bert the nurse who looked after Neena when she broke her leg and had to go to the A and E? So I don't think that only boys can be pilots. Now let's see how we can sort this problem. Have you any ideas on what we can do?**

Róisín: Me and Amy could be the pilots and the boys could be in the plane.

Colm: Not fair, I want to be a pilot too.

Áine: Could there be two planes?

Amy: Yeah. You and Fionnán be the boy pilots in that plane. And me and Róisín will be pilots on the girl plane.

Colm: Yeah, and we'll fly to France together. Me and Fionnán will go in front and you can follow us.

Fionnán: Yeah.

Róisín: And we'll park the planes beside each other in the plane park and go shopping. We'll give you money.

Áine: **That sounds like a good plan.**

The four children busy themselves building the second plane and soon all four pilots are in the air on their way to France.

When the children go home Áine and Joan look at the video footage. They take four photographs from it and use these to record a story of the children's learning experience. They make a copy of the story for each child. The children show and tell their story to their parents, and then add it to their learning portfolios. In their practitioner's file, Áine and Joan make a note of the children's ideas about what boys and girls can and can't do. They plan to get more posters and stories of males and females in non-stereotypical roles and to discuss these with the children. They also plan to develop some play scenarios in which children's ideas about gender stereotyping are challenged.



Reflection: How can I show respect for children's play and their ideas while helping them to work through a problem to find a solution which works for everyone?

**Learning experience 65: Look, the ball spins!****Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Toddlers and young children****Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)**

Mary, the pre-school leader, creates the following story to document Claire's, Robert's and Kyle's learning through an activity at the water table.

Photo 1

Twins Claire and Robert (4 years) and their friend Kyle (nearly 3 years) are playing at the water tray. They are filling and emptying containers and pouring water into waterwheels and watching them turn.

**Photo 2**

The children experiment placing different objects such as balls and cubes in the waterwheels. Claire likes to use the teapot to pour water. Robert joins her in doing this. He uses the small watering can from the vegetable patch to put water over the blocks he has placed in the waterwheel. Kyle watches, quietly choosing not to do any pouring at the waterwheel.

**Photo 3**

Claire picks up an orange ball and puts it on top of the waterwheel. Robert and Kyle watch as she pours water from the teapot. The ball begins to rotate at the top of the waterwheel. *Mary, come quick. Look what happens,* she shouts excitedly. Mary kneels down to see what is happening. Kyle kneels too. Mary asks Claire to pour more water. They all watch carefully as the ball rotates. *My goodness, look at that,* responds Mary. Robert pours more water on top of his cubes. *Mine don't spin. That's not fair,* he concludes. *Maybe try a ball like Claire did,* Mary suggests. Robert takes out the cubes and inserts the ball he has been holding in his hand. He pours water over it with the watering can and it begins to spin too. *Yes,* shouts Robert in delight. Kyle smiles. He visits the water tray again by himself later in the day and tries out the spinning balls.



Mary shares the story and the photographs with the children the next day. They put the story on display on the pre-school wall. Over the next few days Mary and the children investigate further why the cube wouldn't spin while the balls did.



Reflection: How can I make time to document some of children's learning and development using the storytelling approach?



Learning experience 66: Including others

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

Five of the nine girls from senior infants are playing in a group outside at lunchtime. Miss Davison is on yard duty. She overhears another girl, Louise, trying to join them. Louise's best friend Síle is absent today. The girls tell Louise that they don't want to play with her. Miss Davison immediately goes to Louise and acknowledges her hurt: *Louise, I can see that you are feeling sad and lonely. I need someone to help me mind everyone in the yard. Would you like to help me please?* Miss Davison and Louise keep each other company for the remaining few minutes of lunchtime. After lunch Miss Davison tells Louise's teacher about the incident in the yard. Later that day the teacher organises the children for circle time. She replaces her planned work with the discussion: *What do we do if someone wants to join in our play and we already have enough people?* She introduces the discussion using Ruby the class life-sized doll. Ruby tells the children about having to sit by herself one day on a school trip. She describes feeling very upset and wishing she was at home with her Mam and Gran. The teacher asks the children what Ruby's school-mates could have done to help her feel better. They suggest strategies such as taking turns to sit with her, singing songs together so that everyone was involved even if someone was sitting on his/her own, or taking a teddy to sit with. The teacher and children develop this conversation further over the following days.

The teacher notes in her planner to check how Louise copes socially on future days, and especially when Síle is absent. She also makes a note in her practitioner's file.



Reflection: How can I make greater on-the-spot use of assessment information I gather through watching and listening to children?



**Eispéireas foghlama 67a: Mothúcháin a chur in iúl****Téama: Cumarsáid, Aidhm 1 agus Spríoc foghlama 1****Aoisghrúpa: Leanaí****Suíomh: Seisiún naíonra**

Freastalaíonn Caoimhín (3 bliana d'aois) ar naíonra. Is breá leis ceol. Phléigh a thuismitheoirí leis an stiúrthóir, Eimear, an chaoi a bhfuil sé deacair air a mhothúcháin a chur in iúl i gceart agus an chaoi a gcuireann sé sin as dó. Le cúpla seachtain anuas bhí Eimear ag múineadh amhrán do Chaoimhín agus do na leanaí eile sa ghrúpa i dtaobh mothúcháin éagsúla. Bhí úsáid á baint acu as uirlisí ceoil freisin fad is a bhí na hamhráin á gcanadh acu agus bhí siad ag bogadh leis an gceol chun cuidiú leo mothúcháin éagsúla a chur in iúl. Lena linn seo go léir, agus le linn am sárghartha, bhí Eimear ag breathnú ar Chaoimhín chun a fháil amach conas a chuir sé é féin in iúl. Ghlac sí nótaí mionsonraithe mar gheall ar a eispéiris foghlama. Léirigh na nótaí sin go raibh dul chun cinn á dhéanamh ag Caoimhín ag léiriú do na leanaí eile conas a bhraith sé. Chuir Eimear an t-eolas seo in iúl dá mhamaí agus dá dhaidí an chéad uair eile a bhuaíl sí leo.

Samplaí de nótaí Eimear ina comhad cleachtóra.

*Dé Luain 18 Feabhra, 12.10 i.n. Súgradh lasmuigh**Bhí Caoimhín ag súgradh ina aonar sa chlais ghainimh. Rinne sé an gaineamh a chur isteach i dtrucaíl. Tháinig Anraí agus Sorcha sall chun cuidiú leis. Dúirt Caoimhín, “Ná déan” agus rinne buicéad eile in aice leis a thairiscint dóibh.**Dé Céadaoin 27 Feabhra, 9.40 r.n. Súgradh laistigh**Bhí Caoimhín, Eoin, Niamh, agus Amy ag imirt le foireann taeghréithe. Thug Eoin cupán tae do Chaoimhín. D’fhiafraigh Amy de Eoin an bhféadfadh sí roinnt tae a bheith aici. Rinne Eoin neamhaird den iarratas seo agus d’éirigh Amy corraithe. Rinne Caoimhín a chupán tae a thairiscint di.*

?

Ábhar Machnaimh: An gcuirim am ar leataobh chun athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar mo bhreathnadóireachtaí ar eispéiris foghlama na leanaí mar bhealach le feiceáil cén dul chun cinn atá ar siúl acu?





Learning experience 67b: Sharing emotions

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (naíonra)

Caoimhín (3 years) attends a naíonra. He enjoys responding to music. His parents have discussed with Eimear, the stiurthóir (playgroup leader), how he finds it difficult to express his emotions clearly and how this frustrates him. Over recent weeks Eimear has taught Caoimhín and the other children action songs about different emotions. They have also been using instruments while singing the songs and moving to different pieces of music, in order to help them express different feelings. Throughout these experiences, and during play, Eimear has been observing Caoimhín to see how he expresses himself. She makes detailed notes about some of his learning experiences. This documentation shows the progress Caoimhín is making in showing his peers how he feels. Eimear shares this information with his mammy and daddy the next time she is talking to one of them.

Examples of Eimear's notes in her practitioner's file.

Monday 18 February, 12.10 p.m. Outside play

Caoimhín plays by himself in the sand pit. He shovels sand into a play truck. Anraí and Sorcha come over and try to help him. Caoimhín says, Ná déan (don't) and offers them a spare bucket beside him.

Wednesday 27 February, 9.40 a.m. Indoor play

Caoimhín, Eoin, Niamh, and Amy are playing with the tea set. Eoin serves Caoimhín tea. Amy asks Eoin can she have some tea, Eoin ignores the request and Amy gets upset. Caoimhín offers her his cup of tea.



Reflection: Do I take time to review my detailed observations of children's learning experiences as a way of seeing the progress they are making?

Setting tasks

What does setting tasks involve?

Children learn by doing things. Setting tasks for assessment purposes involves the adult in designing activities to gather information on a specific aspect of learning and development. Sometimes the adult might set tasks at the end of a particular period of time or after a piece of work or project on a topic has been done.

How do I set tasks?

The adult decides what information he/she wants to gather about children's learning and development. Knowing this, the adult designs tasks which capture children's interests and excite them, and which involve children using familiar materials and objects. The adult explains the tasks to the children. While the children are completing the tasks the adult watches and listens to what they say and do. All the time, he/she answers questions the children may have and encourages them.

With what age group of children can I use tasks?

Tasks can be used with babies, toddlers and young children.

**Learning experience 68: What's inside the feely bag?****Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 4 and Learning goal 1****Age group: Babies and young children****Setting: Childminding**

Mary looks after Chris (14 months), who has Down syndrome, and his sister Tamzin (nearly 4 years) in her own home. Chris is sitting on the carpet in the living room propped up by cushions. Mary sits on the floor beside him and invites Tamzin to join them. Mary has a *Feely Bag* with lots of items inside which she collected around the house.

Mary: *Chris and Tamzin look*, (giving the bag a shake), *what do you think is inside?*

Tamzin: *Let me see Mary.*

Mary: *Okay, now eyes closed as you pop your hand in and feel something. Can you think what it is?*

Tamzin: (Shuts her eyes and feels inside the bag.) *OOOH! I feel something fluffy and furry. Is it a cat?*

Mary: *I'm not sure. Could it be a cat?*

Tamzin: *I don't know.* (Takes the object out of the bag.) *It's a glove. Silly me.* (Hands the glove to Chris.)

Chris stretches forward excitedly and takes the glove with the soft fur trim from Tamzin. He touches the fur tentatively, gurgles noisily, and hands the glove to Mary as he turns his attention back to Tamzin and the bag.

Mary: *Let's give Chris a go now shall we?*

Chris eagerly dips his hand into the bag and takes out the lid of a biscuit tin. Turning the lid over he catches his reflection and stares at it before handing the lid back to Mary.

Mary: *Who is that?* (Offers the lid back to Chris and holds it so he can see himself.)

Tamzin: *Let me see too. Look it's you Chris, look. And it's me.* (Leans in close to Chris so they can both see themselves in the lid.)

Tamzin then hits the lid with her hand making a loud noise. Chris looks startled and whimpers. Mary takes the lid and taps it again slightly quieter and explains to Chris what she is doing. Chris shows he is not interested in the lid. Instead, he returns to the bag and takes out a sealed plastic cup containing dried pasta. He gives the cup a shake and, hearing the noise that the pasta makes, he smiles and does it again and again. This continues until Chris and Tamzin have removed all the items from the *Feely Bag*. Tamzin then proceeds to put each item back in the bag, and begins the activity again.

In Chris' daily record Mary notes.

- *Excited and curious about the Feely Bag.*
- *Sat up well with support from the cushions.*
- *Was apprehensive of loud noise.*

Mary sends the daily record home, and also refers to the experience with the Feely Bag when she talks to Chris' dad on Friday about what Chris and Tamzin have been doing that week when he collects the children. Chris' dad uses this information to update the physiotherapist on Chris' progress.



Reflection: Do I use objects and activities that interest children and capture their curiosity when setting tasks to gather information about how well they are getting on?

**Learning experience 69: A fun outdoor challenge on camera****Theme: Well-being, Aim 2 and Learning goal 1****Age group: Toddlers and young children****Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)**

Liam and Jean, two of the pre-school staff, and the sixteen toddlers and young children (between 2½ and 4 years) are playing outside. Liam surprises the children with new, large, soft balls. The children are delighted with the balls, grabbing one each and beginning to throw, kick and roll them. The balls are available to the children each day when they're outside. Liam sets tasks on occasion to provide focused opportunities for the children to develop hand-eye co-ordination skills, and for him to build up a picture of their progress in these skills and how he can help the children.

Outside on Monday, Liam and Jean explain to the children that they are going to play some rolling games. They will roll their soft ball in front of them, to the side, and to each other. Dividing the group in two, Liam asks the group of eight children working with him, *I wonder how many balls we will need? Five. No, three. Five Liam*, come the responses. *Let's get five and see if we have enough*, he responds. Two children count out five and bring them to Liam. In turn, he invites each child to take one. Realising there aren't enough, the children ask him to get more! They talk about needing one for each person. A similar conversation takes place in Jean's group.

Sorted with the balls, the children spend the next few minutes rolling their balls. Laughter breaks out as balls hit people's feet and go off in lots of directions. This instantly sends the children running. Some children show frustration when their balls don't go in the direction they want. Liam and Jean empathise with them and offer support. They model rolling.

Over the coming weeks Liam and Jean plan a number of rolling activities, and then move to throwing in order to develop the children's co-ordination skills. They use a variety of objects such as beanbags, balls of different sizes, and soft toys. They record the children on video in the first week and again four months later. They show the video footage to the children and talk to them about how well they have learned to roll and throw. The children love seeing the footage and comment: *Look at my throw! That was 'normous (enormous). My brover (brother) can't do it.*



Reflection: How can I make better use of video footage to help me extend children's learning and to show the children the progress they are making?



**Learning experience 70: A rainbow of colours****Theme: Communicating, Aim 2 and Learning goal 4****Age group: Young children****Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)**

Ten children (between 3 years and 4 years and 4 months) attend the playgroup. Eilis, the playgroup leader, noted the children's excitement and interest the day they saw a rainbow in the garden. She immediately brought crayons and paper outside and the children each drew their own rainbow as they observed it in the sky. She noted their interest in some of the names of the colours, especially indigo and violet. Over the next few weeks Eilis plans a number of experiences designed to help the children learn more about colours.

With Eilis' assistance the children talk about and name colours as they walk in the nearby park, do various painting and play-dough activities, sort vegetables and fruit in the play supermarket, and make costumes for Cinderella's ball. They also experiment with mixing colours, and declare that they have done 'magic' when they generate, under Eilis' guidance, green from a mixture of blue and yellow, and orange from a mixture of red and yellow. As the month progresses Eilis sets up colour areas in the room. Each area features a character such as Blue Bird and Red the Fire Engine, as well as objects in the matching colours. During the following weeks she uses a variety of tasks to assess the children's ability to match, name and select individual colours. One of these involves a sock shop which the children enjoy. Each day she asks two children to play the shopkeeper role. The customers (including Eilis) ask for particular colours of socks. Eilis observes how each shopkeeper fills the customer orders. As the days progress, she notices that some children begin to request socks with particular patterns and combinations of colours and, not content with the range on offer in the shop, bring socks from home to the playgroup! A busy shop selling multicoloured socks and socks with exotic designs is soon trading in the playgroup. News spreads, and the children's parents and minders visit to make purchases as they drop off and collect the children. Building on this, Eilis shares stories with the children that include references to patterns, and she introduces them to factual books which illustrate patterns on animals' coats.

In her practitioner's file Eilis makes a checklist to record her observations in the sock shop during the course of the week, and uses this information to plan further colour and pattern experiences.

Exploring and Thinking, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1, Sock shop

	Date - Oct	red	orange	yellow	violet	green	blue	purple	brown	black	while	stripey	spotty
Fion	15	✓	✓	✓							✓		✓
Deirdre	15	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Sasha	16	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
Billy	16	✓					✓						
Yussef	17	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
George	17		✓	✓		✓	✓						✓
Alisha	18												
Cara	18												
Leon	19												
Aesha	19												

**Reflection: Do I set tasks which capture the children's interest and imagination?**

**Eispéireas foghlama 71a: Forbairt scríbhneoireachta****Téama: Cumarsáid, Aidhm 2 agus Spríoc foghlama 4****Aoisghrúpa: Leanaí****Suíomh: Rang naíonáin (Gaelscoil)**

Tá rang naíonáin á mhúineadh ag Iníon Uí Mhurchú i nGaelscoil. An tseachtain seo bhí sí féin agus an rang ag léamh agus ag plé an scéil, *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. Mar chuid de seo bhí plé ann i dtaobh céard a dhéanfadh na trí bhéar dá mbeadh fhios acu cá raibh cónaí ar Goldilocks. Chuir siad tuairimí in iúl maidir lena dtarlódh agus ceann de na moltaí ná go ndéanfadh na béir praiseach de theach Goldilocks. Thug Iníon Uí Mhurchú tasc do na leanaí agus d'iarr orthu scéalta a scríobh faoi *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. Thug sí tascanna éagsúla do leanaí éagsúla sa rang. Do roinnt de na leanaí thug sí sé phictiúr chun iad a chur in ord an scéil agus chun an focal cuí a roghnú ó liosta focal le cur faoin ngrianghraf cuí. Scríobh grúpa eile leanaí an scéal ina bhfocail féin ina leabhair - leabhair a raibh cruth teachín tuaithe orthu. Scríobh an tríú grúpa leanaí an scéal ina bhfocail féin agus rinne iarracht a shamhlú conas mar a bheadh an scéal dá dtabharfadh na béir cuairt ar theach Goldilocks. Chuir an múinteoir na príomhfocail agus na príomhfhrásaí ar fáil bunaithe ar phlé an ranga.

D'imigh Iníon Uí Mhurchú ó ghrúpa go grúpa de réir mar a d'oibrigh na scríbhneoirí óga ar a scéalta. Spreag sí iad le litriú a úsáid nuair nach raibh an focal a bhí á lorg acu ar an gclár bán. Uaireanta bhí sí ag smaoinéamh os ard in éineacht leo chun cuidiú leo deireadh an scéil a phleanáil: **Chuir Goldilocks glaoch ar a mamaí nuair a chonaic sí an praiseach a bhí déanta!** Gach lá ag am inste scéil thug sí an deis do sheisear a scéalta a léamh, ag léiriú a gcuid leabhar nó na pictiúir a chuir siad in ord an scéil. Gach tráthnóna nuair a bhí na leanaí imithe abhaile scríobh sí cuntas gearr ar scríbhneoireacht na sé leanbh agus chuir leis an eolas a bhí ar taifead aici cheana féin faoina scileanna scríbhneoireachta. Chuir sí freisin cóip d'obair na leanaí ina bhfillteáin oibre.

Sampla de nótaí Iníon Uí Mhurchú ar scéal Mheadhbh ina comhad cleachtóra.

10 Márta 2009: Choinnigh sí na buncharachtair mar an gcéanna; thug sí isteach carachtar amháin nua (mamaí Goldilocks) ar bhealach loighciúil. D'úsáid sí a litriú féin ag léiriú feasacht mhaith fóineolaíochta. Chuir sí ceithre abairt nua sa bhreis leis chun deireadh eile a chur leis an scéal. Dul chun cinn an-mhaith.

?

Ábhar Machnaimh: Conas a bhainfidh mé úsáid níos fearr as eolas measúnaithe chun tascanna éagsúla a thabhairt do leanaí éagsúla agus ar an gcaoi seo cuidiú leo lena bhfoghlaím agus a bhforbairt?





Learning experience 71b: Emergent writing

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (Gaelscoil)

Iníon Uí Mhurchú is a senior infant teacher in a Gaelscoil. This week she and her class have been reading and discussing the story, *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. Part of this has involved the children speculating about what the three bears might do if they knew where Goldilocks lived. They predict many actions for her some of which involve a messy ending for her house. Iníon Uí Mhurchú sets the children a task that involves them in writing stories about *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. She differentiates the task for the class. Some children are given six pictures to sequence the story and to write the relevant word for each from a list. Another group of children write the story in their own words in their books, shaped like a cottage. A third group of children write the story in their own words, including how they imagine the story might end with the bears visiting Goldilocks' house. The teacher provides key words and phrases based on the class discussions.

Iníon Uí Mhurchú moves from group to group as the young writers work on their stories. She encourages them to try spellings when their words are not on the whiteboard. She sometimes thinks aloud with them to help them plan their story ending: *Goldilocks rings her mammy when she sees all the fuss!* Each day at story time she invites six children to read their stories, showing their books or sequenced pictures. Each afternoon when the children have gone home she adds a comment on the writing of the six children to the information she has already recorded about their writing skills. She also adds a copy of the children's work to their learning portfolios.

Example of Iníon Uí Mhurchú's notes on Meadh's story recorded in her practitioner's file.

10th March 2009: Retained original characters; introduced new one (Goldilocks' mammy) in logical way. Used her own spellings showing good phonological awareness. Added four sentences for new story ending. Great progress.



Reflection: How can I make better use of assessment information to differentiate for children's learning and development?

Testing

What is testing?

Ongoing observations and conversations with children provide the adult with rich information on children's progress and achievements as young learners. Testing, another assessment method, can help to confirm this information.

Testing in early childhood usually involves using a commercially produced set of tasks and/or questions to collect information about specific aspects of children's learning and development, such as motor and social skills, behaviour, oral language, and understanding. Some of the tests are known as standardised tests and are usually used in primary schools or for children with special educational needs. These tests are used, scored and interpreted in the same way across all settings that use them. The test scores compare children's learning and development with that of other children of the same age. It is important to remember that test scores for young children can be unreliable. It is also important to remember that, as tests are standardised for particular populations of children, the results for children who may have a different first language, for example, should be interpreted and used with care.



Together with information from other assessment methods, test scores can help identify children who might experience learning difficulties now or in the future. This is called screening¹³. Other tests, known as diagnostic tests, may be used with individual children (with parental permission) to help identify a specific difficulty and to provide supports and resources to minimise the potential impact of this on their learning and development.

How do I carry out testing?

Standardised and diagnostic tests may be used by professionals such as a speech and language therapist or psychologist when there are concerns about a child's learning and development. Primary school teachers working with junior and senior infants use tests for early literacy, numeracy and developmental skills, while special educational needs teachers use diagnostic tests. Many other adults working in out-of-home settings may not use tests.

Each test is designed for a particular purpose and should only be used for that purpose. When selecting tests for young children teachers need to choose those that are meaningful, interesting and inviting to children. The teacher also needs to be confident that all children can fully understand the language used in the test.

With what age group of children can I use tests?

Testing is used mainly with young children. Each test is designed for a particular age range of children.

Learning experience 72: Screening in senior infants

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

Ms Clarke teaches 29 senior infant boys. As part of the school's assessment policy Ms Clarke uses a literacy screening test with the whole class in late January. When correcting the tests she identifies six boys who score below the test threshold. Through observations and conversations, she has been carefully monitoring these boys as she knows they sometimes find letter sounds challenging, and two require ongoing support in developing listening skills. She considers the possibility that their low scores on the test may be attributable to factors other than difficulties in literacy. She takes account of particular factors, such as the language, the complexity of the instructions, and the anxiety that the testing situation can create for some children. Having talked with the boys' parents, Ms Clarke refers them to the Learning-support teacher, Mrs Fitzgerald. After establishing a good relationship with the children this teacher carries out individual diagnostic tests.

Having considered all the available information, Mrs Fitzgerald invites the parents of the six boys to take part in an early intervention programme for 6-8 weeks, in order to assist them in supporting specific aspects of their children's learning. Ms Clarke and Mrs Fitzgerald also agree on some additional learning activities that Ms Clarke can use to work with the boys on both an individual and group basis.

At the end of the early intervention programme the six children are re-tested. Five now score well. While the sixth child has made some progress, Ms Clarke plans to continue to give one-to-one support to him in class. He will also have further diagnostic assessment and support with Mrs Fitzgerald.



Reflection: Does my school have a screening policy in place to help identify children who may need extra and/or specialised support?

¹³ For information on screening in primary schools see page 78 in the document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007). This document states that schools should implement a screening policy in the second school year, preferably by February of the second term.



Learning experience 73: Supporting learning and development through an IEP

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 2

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)

Eoin (3½ years) is attending the local pre-school. Eoin was recently diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Louise, the pre-school leader and Emily (Eoin’s SNA), spend September gathering information on Eoin through direct observations while he takes part in various daily activities, routines and interactions with peers and adults. At the end of the month they meet to discuss how best to support Eoin’s learning and development. They focus, in particular, on the challenges he experiences while playing and working with his peers.

Following this Louise and Emily meet with Eoin’s parents. Eoin’s mum outlines the treatments and therapies Eoin is receiving. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is developed for the first term, with help from the Early Intervention Team in the local Health Service Executive office. Helping Eoin to interact with others is one of their goals. Louise designs a programme of activities with short-term objectives for Eoin that will enable him achieve them. These include using pictures to help Eoin understand different facial expressions and using social stories to support Eoin in coping with social situations. Louise and Emily identify a buddy for Eoin from among his peers who will join him in pair activities and play dates. Eoin’s progress in interacting with others is documented and reviewed in January when some new short-term objectives will be developed in the IEP to help him interact with others.



Reflection: How can I use the information gathered from my observations to feed into the IEP and therefore help children with SEN to progress in their learning in a way which is most appropriate for them at a particular point in time?





Learning experience 74: Working in a special education setting

Theme: Aims and Learning goals across the four themes

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (special primary school)

Stephen (6 years) attends a special school. He has muscular dystrophy and mild general learning disabilities. His parents tell his teacher Linda that he loves his cat, Tabby and dislikes noise. Based on assessments of Stephen's learning and development, Linda and the team of therapists working in the school devise a programme of learning experiences for him.

Linda focuses on Stephen's language, his challenging behaviour, his motor skills, and his early reading. She observes, assesses and records his speech and language: he shows delayed expressive language, for example calling a train a *choo choo*. He also finds sentence structure challenging and experiences articulation difficulties, for example calling a doggy a *goggy* and substituting *t* for *s* and *ch*. Linda shares this information with the speech therapist Nora who carries out further testing and, using the information from this, designs a daily language and speech programme for Stephen.

Based on Kate's (Special Needs Assistant) and her own observations of Stephen's challenging behaviours, Linda changes Stephen's afternoon routine. She refers him to Joan the physiotherapist who takes Stephen to the clinic's hydrotherapy pool for two afternoons per week, and to Gill the occupational therapist who takes Stephen to the Snoozaleen Relaxation Room on two other afternoons.

To support the development of Stephen's motor skills Joan provides Linda with suitable physical exercises, which include altering the time he spends sitting and standing. To make it easier for Stephen to move around the classroom Gill investigates the possibility of accessing an electric wheelchair for him. She also organises a range of aids to help him overcome some of the difficulties he is experiencing with fine motor skills. These aids include a pencil-grip and a modified computer keyboard.

Finally, Linda's assessment of Stephen's early reading skills shows his sight-word recognition is confined to his own name. Various tests have shown that he also experiences challenges with visual discrimination, sequential memory, and auditory sequencing. Considering this information, Gill suggests that Linda would arrange for Stephen to have sensory integration sessions.



Reflection: How can I continually build the practice of interdisciplinary work in order to provide children, where necessary, with specialised support to help them progress in their learning and development?



Thinking about my practice

1. *Am I gathering information on children's learning and development using a range of methods?*
2. *How am I using this information to extend and enrich learning for each child?*

The challenges and strengths of assessment methods

As noted earlier, using a combination of assessment methods provides a detailed account of each child's learning and development. Table 14 sets out some of the challenges and strengths of self-assessment, conversations, observation, setting tasks, and standardised testing.



Table 14: Challenges and strengths

Method	Challenges	Strengths
Self-assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can place too much emphasis on what children make or do without looking at why. ■ Children need time to develop skills to think about their learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Helps children develop an understanding of themselves as learners. ■ Encourages children to feel a sense of pride and achievement in themselves. ■ Enables children to take greater responsibility for their learning. ■ Makes learning more enjoyable and motivating.
Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Children’s developing ability to communicate influences what information they can share and how. ■ The adult needs to listen carefully to how and what children communicate. ■ The adult requires time to develop skills to encourage and enable children to share insights on their learning and development through talking. ■ Can be time-consuming. ■ Can be difficult to do with a large group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Gives children opportunities to talk about their work, experiences, family, likes, and dislikes. ■ Provides information about why children reacted in a particular way, about what they did and said, or how they made things.
Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Planned observations and especially target child observations require time. ■ The adult requires time to develop skills in recording key pieces of information. ■ The adult needs to be aware of what information he/she is looking for, and to be mindful of how that influences the observations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can be spontaneous or planned, and can be carried out in a few seconds or minutes. ■ Provides information about the context in which children’s learning and development takes place. ■ Gives immediate information about how and what children are learning and experiencing.
Setting tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Often requires particular resources. ■ The adult needs time to observe children taking part in the tasks, and where helpful, to talk to them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Can provide samples of children’s work as evidence of their learning and development. ■ Provides information about children’s learning in activities which interest them.
Testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Test scores can be unreliable. ■ Tasks and questions can lack meaning and relevance for children and may be culturally inappropriate. ■ Can be time-consuming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Helps to identify children who may have learning difficulties. ■ Indicates specific learning difficulties.

Conclusion

Children, like adults, are natural assessors of their own progress and achievements. The adult can enrich and extend children’s learning through assessment by identifying learning and development, feeding information back to children, celebrating their progress and achievement with them, and adapting practice and planning for further learning. In this way, assessment helps the adult create portraits which show the richness of children’s learning and development. In doing this, assessment also guides the journeys children make as they go.