In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in societal and government initiatives promoting accountability in early childhood. Quality rating systems have been developed in numerous states, state childcare licensing agencies are asking for proof of developmentally appropriate curriculum being implemented, and parents want to know that their children are in an optimal learning environment.

School systems and government agencies are tasked to set goals, track progress, analyze strengths and weaknesses in programs, use this information to inform lesson planning and individualize, and report on their achievements, with consequences for unmet goals. Early childhood education and intervention programs are increasingly being asked to prove their worth. This means that in addition to implementing a solid, research-based curriculum, teachers must link that curriculum to assessment. It’s more than a bit overwhelming for teachers!

In order to assist you, we have developed an authentic assessment process based on observation that easily pairs with FunShine curriculum. Printable resources and training videos have been placed online. Before we introduce you to it, however, let’s start with some background info on assessment.

What Is Assessment? Why Is It Important?

“Assessment is the process of gathering information about children from several forms of evidence, then organizing and interpreting that information.” (McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2004, p. 3)

“The National Early Childhood Assessment Resource Group summarized the purposes for appropriate uses of assessment in the early childhood years as follows:

- Assessing to promote children’s learning and development
- Identifying children for health and social services
- Monitoring trends and evaluating programs and services
- Assessing academic achievement to hold individual students, teachers, and schools accountable” (Shepard, Kagan, Lynn & Wurtz, 1998, p.20–21)

Why is assessment such a hot topic in early childhood? It’s important for a number of reasons. For starters, assessment assures that curriculum is comprehensive, giving attention to all areas of development. It also measures school readiness, which is especially important in economically disadvantaged homes/communities. Assessment can also be used to identify special needs and for intervention with children who have developmental delays, as well as children simply needing some individualized instruction. Finally it can enhance social, language, and academic skills through responsive early care and education. Ultimately it can contribute to better outcomes for children, when it is done carefully.

Considerations/Cautions

There are a number of things that are important to keep in mind when you begin assessing children. The tools and process that you choose to utilize must be reliable and valid. Does it give you the information you are seeking? Is the observation based on what you actually see as opposed to what you expect to see? How is the information going to be used? Be careful – assessment done incorrectly and with bias can easily lead to children being typecast or categorized.

Our role as teachers is only to measure a child’s individual progress over time. It is not appropriate to measure one child against another. Also, teachers typically do not have the training or the expertise to make any kind of a formal diagnosis. While we may have a hunch that a child may be ahead (or behind) developmental milestones, our most important role in case of concern is to alert parents, be supportive, and provide them with good community resources so they can pursue additional help from specialists.

So, to sum it up: “Assessments can make crucial contributions to the improvement of children’s well-being, but only if they are well designed, implemented effectively, developed in the context of systematic planning, and are interpreted and used appropriately.” Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What and How?, National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences (Snow and Hemel, 2008)
Authentic Assessment Process

Below is the three-step process to use with our free online resources. All documents can be found in PDF form in the Resources section of funshineexpress.com, along with a training video.

Step 1 – Plan Activities to Observe

All FunShine curriculum activities are labeled with Indicators. A comprehensive list of those codes and the Developmental Continuum is included in your Starter Pack. Domains, Subdomains, Goals, and Indicators are identified for infants to 5 year olds.

The Indicators are aligned to your state standards, which can be found at funshineexpress.com. Locate the United States map and click on your state to access it.

Assessment should be an ongoing process, with meetings to inform parents held several times per year. We suggest assessing in three month periods, followed with a parent meeting at the conclusion of each. So, assess between Sept.-Nov., Dec.-Feb., March-May, and June-Aug. Hold parent meetings in November, February, May, and August.

We cover each Indicator at least once in every 3 month period. Look for the highlighted Indicators at the top of activities and observe/assess those.

If you would like to select different activities for assessment, or work with a different time frame for assessment checkpoints, you may do so.

An Activity List of those recommended for assessment is also available online. You will find that many of the activities cover multiple skills. This helps keep observation manageable.
Step 2 – Gather Evidence, Adjust Curriculum, and Build a Portfolio for each child

Once you have decided which activities you will observe, set aside some time to prepare a bit by thinking about the skills you are watching for. Ask yourself, “Are the activities meeting the children’s needs? Does a child need extra practice or help in a particular area?” “How can I adapt an activity to give a child extra practice or to extend learning?” Adapt future activities based on the answers to these questions. You will want to adjust your activities and curriculum on a daily basis. Be sure to make notes so you can keep track of the changes you are making to meet the needs of your children.

In order to accurately monitor skills, try to keep the group size small. You might also want to consider asking another teacher or adult to help you observe.

Finally, are there additional skills that might be necessary for your group or in the region you serve? Adjust your program as necessary.

A.) Use the Group Assessment Worksheet to record your observations and anecdotal evidence. Notes should be objective and record a child’s skills – not your opinion! Try to keep it a secret that you are assessing. Children’s behavior will be most natural if they are not aware you are doing this.

B.) Set up a folder or binder for each child. Transfer info from the Group Assessment Worksheet to the Individual Assessment Record, and clip it into each binder. As you assess, collect a variety of work samples and/or pictures and videos of each child playing and mastering certain skills. Date them accordingly. You do not need to have work samples for every single Indicator. Be selective and include those that are a meaningful representation. Too much material makes binders difficult to manage and is overwhelming for you and parents.

Step 3 – Complete Assessment Reports, Meet with Parents

At the end of your assessment period, condense the information in each child’s portfolio onto an Assessment Report and select the work samples or pictures you want to share with parents. Assessment Reports are a “softer” approach since they’re not filled with codes. If you feel nervous, remember that parents are often nervous for these meetings, too!

Set aside some time without interruptions. When you meet with parents, focus on each child’s strengths and the growth you have seen. Use stories such as, “I remember his (curiosity, problem solving) when he was working on this project.” or “I extended this activity to give her an extra challenge because she already knew this skill and look what she was able to accomplish!” or “She loves to (play ball with a friend). Does she have a chance to practice that with friends away from school? It is a great way to build physical and social skills!”

Be sure to ask parents to share some of their observations or concerns so you can discuss how you can be mutually supportive at home and school to set goals and maximize growth in their child.

If necessary, know who you can refer a child or family to for additional assistance.
Trust your instinct and know your limits.