

Reading Assignment

Data In, Data Out: What Is High-Quality Documentation and Why Does It Matter?



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Observation-based assessment is the most authentic and accurate way to understand young children's development. But in order for these assessments to provide reliable and actionable data for teachers and administrators, observation-based assessments depend on teachers capturing high-quality observations.

What Is High-Quality Documentation?

Consider these two anecdotes:

“Raymond and Stacy made cookies out of play dough.”

“During work time in the house area, Raymond and Stacy made cookies out of playdough. Using shape cookie cutters, Stacy made circle and triangle cookies and identified both. Raymond put different shapes together to make new shapes. He said, ‘I can make a big house cookie with a square and a triangle.’”

Clearly, the second anecdote provides a richer, fuller picture of learning, but not just because it is longer. The first anecdote tells us the activity the children were engaged in. The second anecdote provides additional information about each child's learning and development. Specifically, the second anecdote includes

- A direct connection to learning standards and assessment items.
- Indication of a child's developmental level.
- Information that can guide a teacher in planning an appropriate follow-up activity.

In the second anecdote, we know that Stacy and Raymond demonstrated different levels of development in this observation. Stacy was able to recognize and name basic shapes. Raymond was also able to compose and name a new shape from shapes he already knew. These differences help guide the teacher with what skills each child needs to develop next.

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High-quality documentation answers the following questions:

- What learning content is occurring during my observation?
- Which specific developmental goals is the observation connected to?
- Will this observation promote conversation when shared with families?
- Does the observation suggest next steps for learning?

Why Does High-Quality Documentation Matter?

Reports to measure learning or guide instructional planning are only as good as the data used in those reports. Administrators and teachers depend on authentic, high-quality observations to understand the learning happening in the classroom. Capturing high-quality data is the crucial first step to using data to

guide instruction. High-quality documentation allows teachers to plan instruction and activities to meet each child's specific needs. And while administrators also look at aggregate data across classrooms, they rely on teachers capturing high-quality data to provide them with an accurate and complete view of the learning and development happening in the classroom.

Do I have enough time in the day to capture high-quality documentation?

Yes! You do, but you're not alone in thinking this way. One of the most common concerns that arise in regards to observation-based assessment is the amount of time it takes to gather evidence for each child on every assessment item. While it can be a time-consuming process, there are many strategies teachers can employ to ease the workload:

1. **Focus your observations.** It would be impossible to gather anecdotes for every item or every child

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in your classroom on a daily basis. Instead, narrow your focus to a smaller group of children or a particular part of the daily routine.

Observe a smaller group of children. During work time, sit down in the block area, interacting and taking observations with the small group of children that chose to play in that area. You're bound to catch skills in the areas of math, social emotional development, and approaches to learning, but it's also just as likely that science and technology or language and literacy content will occur. You may only capture observations for 3–5 children, but those observations will be plentiful and rich with data. The next day, choose another area with different children to interact and observe.

Observe part of the daily routine. Consider your daily routine and when you might be able to collect observations for “batches” of children at the same time. For example, if children sign-in each



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morning, sit down at the sign-in table to collect observations on fine-motor skills or writing. Observe children during large-group time or outside time, specifically noting various levels observed of gross-motor development.

2. Divide up the work. Effective teams develop trust in one another's abilities as a result of mutual sharing and clear expectations (Epstein, 82, 2016). Make sure you are enlisting the support of all teachers in the classroom to record observations. Classroom support staff, including special education teachers and parents, may offer additional insight in the development of their own children or the children on their caseload.

3. Use multiple means to collect data. There are numerous ways that teachers can collect observations. Some teachers prefer paper and pencil, jotting down notes throughout the day. Accessibility of note-taking materials is important, so keep a

clipboard close or a small note pad and golf pencil in your pocket. Use technology, or download the COR Advantage app, and snap photos or capture videos to document learning in action. Determine if these photos and videos meet the high-quality requirements noted above, and if not, add a supplemental, text-based anecdote. Collect work samples that demonstrate writing abilities or the details presented in artwork. If you are using the online COR Advantage platform, snap photos of these work samples tagging them to the relevant COR Advantage item. Often, it is not just one method, but a combination of data collection systems that work best for teachers. Try out several options and choose the one or ones that work best for you!

4. Plan purposefully. When planning activities, teachers can anticipate the developmental skills required to complete the activity; in order to do so, teachers should consider what children might do or say when presented with a specific activity. For

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example, if a teacher has planned a small group in which children have frogs and lily pads of different colors, they might expect some children to place their lily pads randomly, others to line all the lily pads up in a row, and still others to create a pattern, whether simple or complex, from their lily pads.

While a teacher may intend to target a few specific skills through an activity, children often demonstrate connected skills. For example, a teacher may plan the above math activity for patterning, but children may also demonstrate counting, pretend play, or sing a song about frogs. By intentionally thinking of potential connected skills prior to an activity, teachers have the ability to adjust their documentation accordingly.

When authentic, observation-based data is used to enhance professional learning and make decisions regarding the strategies teachers use to scaffold learning in the classroom, it has the ability to put children on a trajectory for success. However, as teachers, we must ensure the data we are entering into our assessment system is of the highest quality, for only then will the children benefit from the decisions being made based on the data pulled out of the system.

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