

# Authentic Assessment

## A Venerable Idea Whose Time Is Now

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### Abstract

Many early childhood assessment practices involve table top testing that requires young children to behave like an adult (e.g., follow adult directives, attend to task, and answer questions). Research and professional policy standards have identified and mandated alternatives. Authentic assessment is the alternative to conventional testing practices for young children and is based on an old and venerable idea which, instead, emphasizes observing young children's behavior during routines and everyday settings as they engage in real-life tasks and activities and display crucial learning competencies. This article shares professional strategies for implementing a 21st-century approach to assessment by facilitating an optimal authentic assessment experience for young children and their families.

All too often young children are assessed using conventional testing methods that are intended for older children or adults. Research and policy papers have identified the need for alternative assessment methods (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2010; Macy, Bagnato, Macy, & Salaway, 2015). Authentic assessment is an alternative to conventional testing that resembles the Latin origin of the term "assessment" (i.e., *assidere*) meaning to sit beside and get to know.

Authentic assessment is the alternative to conventional testing practices for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. It is based on an old and venerable idea which, instead, emphasizes observing young children during routines and in everyday settings, engaging in real-life tasks and activities, and displaying crucial learning competencies (Linder & Linas, 2009; Losardo & Syverson, 2011; Macy, Bagnato et al., 2015; Meisels, Bickel, Nicholson, Xue, & Atkins-Burnett, 2001). Authentic assessment reflects a return to the developmentally appropriate roots of early childhood education and developmental psychology while capitalizing on the strengths of modern mobile computer technologies to capture real-life capabilities. This article shares professional strategies for implementing a 21st-century approach to assessment by facilitating an optimal authentic assessment experience for young children and their families.

The foundation for assessment should be to measure skills that reflect what the child is capable of doing in real-world contexts (Bricker, Squires, Frantz, & Xie, 2015; Lee, Bagnato, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2015). The word *authentic* refers to opportunities created for children that reflect typical experiences, rather than discrete isolated tasks that are irrelevant to the child's daily life. Authentic assessment creates linkages between assessment and programmatic efforts. Observing young children participating in authentic activities leads to a better understanding of how they interact with people and their environment in ways that are useful and meaningful to them (Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004). An authentic assessment process involves children performing activities that are meaningful and functional in their everyday environments with familiar people. The following ideas are presented to frame the implementation of authentic assessment practice (Bagnato, 2007).

### Use technology to facilitate authentic assessments and progress or program evaluations.

Professionals now have more tools with a wider range of applications (Hutlinger & Johanson, 2000; McConnell, Priest,



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Davis, & McEvoy, 2000). Recent advances in technology have the potential to make it easier for providers and families to use authentic assessment. There are several web-based data management systems to record individual and group information that offer the following options: automatic scoring, child journaling, progress reports, links to accountability reporting (e.g., state, federal Office of Special Education Programs, Head Start), assessment activities, and online curriculum. For example, the *Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System (AEPS™) for Infants and Young Children* has an online tool called the AEPSi to facilitate authentic assessments (Macy, 2010). The AEPSi, and other data management tools like the *Riverside Early Assessment of Learning* (Bracken & Panter, 2011) allow professionals the ability to create reports for families to monitor child progress with an eye toward kindergarten readiness (Bracken & Panter, 2011).

Several instruments now employ tablet computer and cell-phone apps to record observations of children's ongoing behaviors via video segments and direct recording of skill acquisition. The *myIGDIs* allows screening assessment and progress monitoring on tablet computers in English and Spanish. It is available online and authored by doctors (McConnell, Bradfield, Wackerle-Hollman, & Rodriguez, 2014). Video and computer recording technologies are making it possible for families to see the progress their children are making. Electronic portfolios can document child progress over time and some have family modules that allow the child's caregivers the opportunity to upload artifacts collected across people, places, and settings. The training needs of users, access, and associated costs should be considered when selecting technology.

### Conduct assessment over time.

Information collected across time will provide a holistic picture of the child. Judgments are often made about children based on limited exposure such as a snapshot test conducted within a narrow window of time when the child may or may not be

performing in a typical manner. To determine the degree to which a child possesses a skill or behavior, professionals should monitor child performance on an ongoing basis. It may take several sessions or days to observe child performance, but the evidence that can be obtained over time by the robust evidence collected through observation and authentic assessment practices will help identify whether the target skill is emerging, used some of the time, or has been mastered by the child (Bagnato, McLean, Macy, & Neisworth, 2011).

### "Orchestrate" authentic assessments across people, contexts, and occasions.

Parent and professional teams using an authentic assessment approach to early childhood intervention are effective when a team leader orchestrates the assessments and coordinates team decision making. The team leader facilitates and organizes the assessment procedures and reporting (Macy & Bagnato, 2010). In addition, the team leader coordinates the decision-making process and intervention planning, ascertaining ways for parents to remain integral to the process. Team leaders may be school psychologists, early intervention specialists, social workers, or other members of the team, depending on the child's needs. The team leader makes sure that all team members understand their assessment responsibilities. For example, the team leaders ensure that unique information is collected from the parents regarding the child's skills and that teacher information is gathered regarding the child's learning and social behaviors at school. Furthermore, the team leader synthesizes and organizes the information from the team to create a unified report. The team leader may also orchestrate a plan for progress monitoring and follow-up.

### Incorporate assessment materials and equipment that are inviting, fun, and motivating to children.

Authentic assessment approaches reflect the ongoing experiences children may encounter in their home, school, community, and other places where young children spend time. The authentic assessment should closely resemble the real life conditions under which the behaviors or skills are needed, and materials used to assess children should closely resemble those needed for the activity (e.g., mealtime). Professionals should circumvent situations in which table-top testing is used to assess young children (Bagnato & Macy, 2010). When assessment includes the actual or authentic activity, the child is operating under more usual conditions and has experience performing similar tasks, providing a more accurate picture of the child's true ability. Assessments should include materials familiar to children such as common toys or household items.

### Match the team assessment model to the child.

Team assessment models in early childhood intervention include interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary models

of assessment. *Interdisciplinary teams* assess children individually, but consult and integrate common goals across developmental areas and develop a unified report. Members of *transdisciplinary teams* jointly assess children and share their expertise across disciplines. Authentic assessment teams collaboratively make decisions as to the preferred model of teamwork (Macy & Bagnato, 2013). In addition, teamwork models depend on the severity of the child's needs, service setting, or both. For example, depending on the physical needs of the child, the team may rely on parent observation and report of child's motor skills at home or may collect information from the parent and a physical therapist who observed the child with the parent at home.

## Rely on parent judgments and observations.

Today, assessment practices are more ecologically based than they were in the past. Settings where children are assessed tend to be more naturalistic and representative of the types of places children spend their time. Assessments often occur in settings that are comfortable and familiar to the child, instead of a clinic or unfamiliar environment. Family members are included in the authentic assessment process. Bailey and his colleagues (2006) recommended families understand their child's strengths, abilities, and special needs. Families call for emotional, material, and informational support (McWilliam, 2005). Rapport and a trusting relationship should be fostered with the child's family. Assessment team members should talk to parents and family members about the child and encourage them to share their observations in order to better understand the child's skills across people and settings (Guralnick, 2006). The team must explain the authentic assessment process to families and provide information to the family about a particular assessment tool(s) that will be used. The team should ask questions to validate the assessment process, explain results, address difficult issues, and provide resources to encourage continued parental involvement (Brink, 2002; Dunst, Johanson, Trivette, & Hamby, 1991).

## Select a common instrument to unify interdisciplinary and interagency teamwork.

Interdisciplinary teams typically use curriculum-based assessments to guide the authentic assessment process (Bagnato et al., 2010). Curriculum-based instruments link assessment to programming and intervention planning. Curriculum-based assessments are also designed to gather information from various sources, including parents and teachers, and can be used for progress monitoring (Macy, Bricker et al., 2015). There are several commercially available instruments to facilitate collaboration and monitor child development using authentic assessment practices. Curriculum-based assessments frequently used in early childhood intervention programs include the AEPS (Bricker,



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2002), the Hawaii Early Learning Profile (Parks, 2007), and the Carolina Curriculum for Young Children with Special Needs (Johnson-Martin, Attermeier, & Hacker, 2004).

## Communicate effectively with families and children.

Many parents experience language and cultural barriers during the service delivery process (Wolfe & Durán, 2013). When implementing authentic assessment, effective communication is critical so families and children receive accurate information. Assessment teams should seek out resources if an interpreter is needed. Developing cross-cultural competency is a process (Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015; Veseley, Ewaida, & Anderson, 2014). Professionals must establish trust and respect with families and their children. Halgunseth (2009) recommended the following strategies to build rapport with families using culturally competent communication: (a) incorporate culture and community, (b) show parents they are wanted and welcome, (c) aim to bring families into a partnership with the program, (d) reach out to families, (e) give families resources and supports, and (f) commit to setting standards within the program.

Assessment team members must communicate with families and other professionals using common terms in both content and relationship dimensions (Watson, Kiekhefer, & Olshansky, 2006). Written and verbal communication related to authentic assessment should avoid the use of technical language or acronyms so that information is accessible to a wide audience. Jargon-free materials make it easier to communicate content, as well as build positive relationships by facilitating clear communication.



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When children play they are making social connections, learning about their world, and discovering more about themselves in what they like and don't like to play.

### Use sensitive instruments to gauge child progress.

Development is shaped by the ongoing interactions between children and their social environment, and these negotiations have important consequences for learning and development (Macy, 2015; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). It is important to make use of a tool that can capture the developmental changes that are occurring. To learn more about tools and the nature of different tools, professionals should seek out reviews published in academic journal articles or books on assessment tools. For example, the LINKing book functions similar to a *Consumer Reports* publication to present a wide variety of products with pros and cons (Bagnato et al., 2010). The information collected from an authentic approach is used to create learning goals/objectives, plan or create instruction and a curriculum, and evaluate the effectiveness of a program (Bricker, 1996; Neisworth & Bagnato, 2004; Pretti-Frontczak, Bagnato, Macy, & Sexton, 2011).

### Share assessment responsibilities with "significant others."

Authentic assessment does not rely solely upon professionals to assess children (Lee et al., 2015). Authentic assessment engages "significant others" in the child's life—familiar, knowledgeable, and informed caregivers in the child's life, both parents and

professionals who meet this criterion as the child's "team." Authentic assessment relies upon a group of people to collect information about children across various settings or monitor skills progress over time (Bagnato, Goins, Pretti-Frontczak, & Neisworth, 2014).

Partnerships consist of informed caregivers such as parents, grandparents, and other family members, as well as teachers, speech therapists, and other professionals who are familiar with and have knowledge of the child's skills and abilities. Effective partnerships are characterized by mutual trust and respect for one another's roles and expertise, ability to communicate with others, and openness to share typical assessment role responsibilities (Moreno & Klute, 2011). Assessment responsibilities are shared when parents are considered central members of the team with valuable observations and information to share regarding their child's skills and development. Similarly, assessment responsibilities are shared when teachers and child care providers have input in the data gathering process.

### Use clinical judgment/informed clinical opinion.

Clinical judgment, or informed clinical opinion (ICP), is another effective way to gather information (Bagnato, McKeating-Esterle, Fevola, Bortolamasi, & Neisworth, 2008). Moreover, ICP is mandated in its use by federal law in the revision of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act legislation; ICP is required in all forms of assessment but has a particular role in gauging and documenting eligibility for early intervention services, especially when traditional forms of testing are inappropriate or insensitive due to the young child's functional limitations. Professionals are able to use their knowledge, experience, and first-hand relationship with the young child to rate or classify need for help in promoting development. Instead of putting a child and family through a battery of performance assessments, clinical judgment can bypass some or all direct testing of the child. Families benefit from the use of authentic assessments to screen, diagnose, and determine eligibility for early childhood intervention services. An authentic assessment framework used to make ICPs gives professionals a wealth of information sometimes lacking from conventional testing procedures.

### Incorporate play opportunities into assessment practices.

Play is essential in the growth and development of children. When children play they are making social connections, learning about their world, and discovering more about themselves in what they like and don't like to play. As water is essential to fish, play is essential to children. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* stated in Article 31 that children have the right to "rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (1989, p. 9).

When implementing authentic assessment, team members need to find ways to assess young children with games, familiar

objects like toys they enjoy, and other aspects of their environment where they can express themselves through play. Several play-based assessments can be purchased from a commercial publisher, or professionals can create their own. (O'Grady & Dusing, 2015). If using a homemade play-based assessment, professionals should use caution when making high-stakes decisions, as the reliability and validity may be limited or unknown. Creating learning communities for children based on play is a useful way to observe the authentic skills being assessed (Galinsky, 2012).

Ideally, authentic assessments are non-stigmatizing, use children's motivation, aid in decision-making, and involve families (Bagnato, 2007; Macy & Bagnato, 2013). Authentic assessment can also be more fun than conventional testing for the child, family, and professional. Professionals should support the implementation and use of authentic assessment practices to ensure meaningful results that optimize every child's full potential.

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## Learn More

Authentic assessment is a natural and fun way to discover the abilities of children. Professional development opportunities on authentic assessment practices are available from a variety of sources. Here are websites for some of the leading organizations in early childhood who have offerings for learning more about authentic assessment:

- ZERO TO THREE  
<https://www.zerotothree.org/events/2-annual-conference-2016-building-powerful-connections>
- Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children  
[www.deconference.org](http://www.deconference.org)
- National Association for the Education of Young Children  
<https://www.naeyc.org/conference>

Books and journal articles offer support to learning more about authentic assessment. Some online resources for more literature offerings, see the following websites:

- Association for Childhood Education International  
[www.acei.org/news-publications](http://www.acei.org/news-publications)
- Infant & Toddler IGDIs  
<http://igdi.ku.edu/research/publications/>
- AEPS Linked System  
[www.aepslinkedsystem.com/publications.html](http://www.aepslinkedsystem.com/publications.html)
- Tracking, Referral, and Assessment Center (TRACE)  
[www.tracecenter.info/topics.php](http://www.tracecenter.info/topics.php)

New media focused on authentic assessment may include blogs, podcasts, and video clips on YouTube.

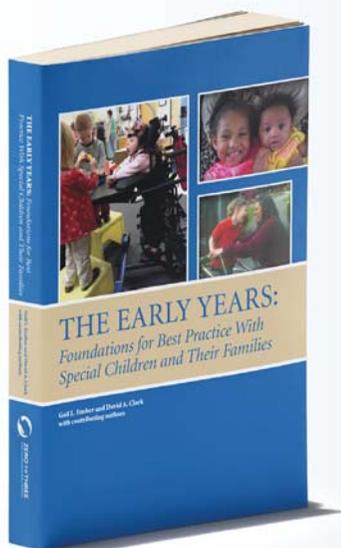
- (Blog) Building Upon the Things in The Environment & Routines for Children's Ubiquitous Play (BUTTERCUP)  
[www.marisamacy.com/blog](http://www.marisamacy.com/blog)
- (Blog) Pre-K Teach and Play  
<http://preteachandplay.com>
- (Podcast) Little Kids, Big Questions: A Parenting Podcast ZERO TO THREE Series  
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/little-kids-big-questions-a-parenting-podcast-series>
- (Podcast) NAEYC Radio  
[www.naeyc.org/newsroom/NAEYCradio](http://www.naeyc.org/newsroom/NAEYCradio)
- (YouTube video) *Mind in the Making* by Ellen Galinsky at Fred Rogers Center  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asuzKzgX-94>

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