T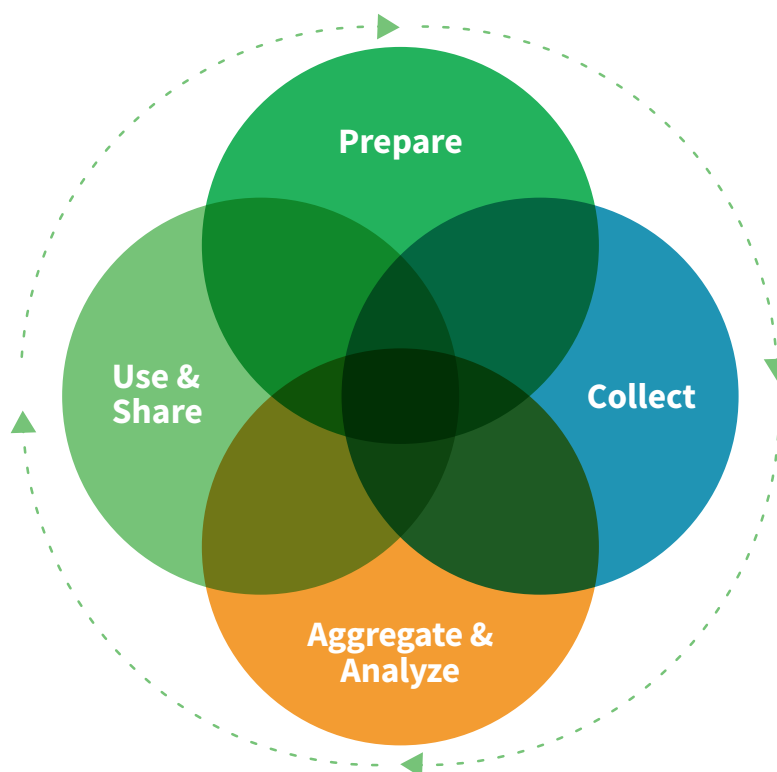his section highlights program-level supports you may need, and expectations for education staff during each stage of the cycle. In Appendix B, use a checklist to identify the parts of each activity where your program is doing well and where you have trouble.

As you think about the cycle, consider parallel ongoing child assessment processes at different levels in your program. As a program leader, you need to support these parallel processes. Education staff need to use the cycle to collect ongoing assessment information about each child in their classroom, their family childcare program, or their home-based caseloads. Program leadership use the cycle as they review center, program, or grantee information about children's progress in ELOF and school readiness goals. The sections that follow discuss each of the four activities and the parallel processes within each activity.

A. Prepare

Preparing for ongoing assessment is the first and most important activity in the cycle. This is when you develop an overall assessment plan, procedures to implement the plan, and a timeline. Assessment plans address how ongoing child assessment data will be collected and used at different levels, including grantees, sites, classrooms, family childcare homes, and home-based services. Plans should also address variations in assessment practices based on children's ages, their languages and cultures, and their abilities. In the Prepare section of the cycle, your program will develop plans to establish and support an ongoing assessment system to ensure that staff collect valid and reliable data and use that information to teach children, support parents, and inform curriculum implementation and assessment practices.

NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning

Early Childhood
National Centers

12

ONGOING CHILD ASSESSMENT:
A GUIDE FOR PROGRAM LEADERS

Grantee and Site Preparation

1. Form an ongoing child assessment planning and implementation team.

First, establish a team to plan and implement all preparation activities for grantees and all associated programs. The planning team should include diverse perspectives. For example, you may want to include an education manager, a coach, teachers and family childcare providers who work with children of different ages, a data coordinator, a disabilities coordinator, a home visitor, a child development specialist, and family engagement staff. This team should also include staff who have knowledge of and experience working with children who are DLLs to ensure that assessment practices are culturally and linguistically responsive to the children in the program.

The team will meet periodically to prepare to implement the ongoing assessment system. This team will plan and support implementation of a system of ongoing child assessment for all children in the program, including children receiving home-based services, children in center-based classrooms or family childcare centers, children who are dual language learners, and children with disabilities. It is important for the team to understand the purpose of ongoing child assessment so they can plan appropriately.

> **Resource Highlight**
>
> For more information about preparing to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment practices, see the Dual Language Learners Program Assessment (DLLPA).

2. Create teaching teams who plan and implement ongoing assessment together.

All education staff who spend time interacting with children should complete training for ongoing assessment. This includes teachers, teaching assistants, family childcare providers, home visitors, and other service providers such as special educators and speech language pathologists. Everyone who works with children should attend training. Have education staff work in teams as they plan and implement ongoing child assessment. Classroom teachers can organize teaching teams that include all staff in their classrooms, coaches, and other service providers who collect and analyze ongoing child assessment. Home-based staff teams might include multiple home-based providers working together as a team, their coaches, and other service providers. Family childcare staff may organize a cohort of providers and include coaches, child development specialists, and assistants.

3. Decide what to assess, when to assess, and how to assess.

Ongoing child assessment systems include a few related components. The planning team will identify the parts of the system they need to assess—including the knowledge and skills, schedule, and methods and instruments—so they can develop training and implementation plans.

NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning

Early Childhood
National Centers

13

ONGOING CHILD ASSESSMENT:
A GUIDE FOR PROGRAM LEADERS

3a. What to assess.

As early education services for children have grown, so has the need for assessment information to guide these services. As a result, Head Start has developed the ELOF. The ELOF serves as the foundation for what to teach. The HSPPS require Early Head Start and Head Start programs to align curriculum and ongoing assessment with the ELOF. Programs should also consider the foundations in their state ELDS and how they align with the ELOF.

The ELOF includes five central domains for infants and toddlers—including Approaches to Learning; Social and Emotional Development; Language and Communication; Cognition; and Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. The domains for preschool are very similar to the domains for infants and toddlers. They only differ in Language and Communication—which includes Literacy—and Mathematics Development and Scientific Reasoning—which replaces Cognition. Each ELOF domain breaks into sub-domains, and sub-domains break into goals. The goals offer a three-tier developmental progression for infants and toddlers (birth to 9 months, 8 to 18 months, and 16 to 36 months) ending in a list of indicators. The developmental progression for preschool is divided into two levels (36 to 48 months and 48 to 60 months), also ending in a list of indicators.

> **Resource Highlight**
>
> For more information on aligning curriculum to the ELOF: Using the ELOF to Inform Curriculum Planning and Implementation

3b. When to assess.

The HSPPS provide guidance for programs developing assessment schedules and require staff to gather child-level data and then aggregate and analyze it three* times a year. This establishes a yearlong assessment cycle. Data from the first assessment cycle help staff decide what practices to implement and what data to collect during the second cycle. Data from the second cycle helps staff decide what practices to implement and what data to collect during third period and year-end. Managers use the data to identify program strengths and needs, develop and implement plans to address those needs, and evaluate their compliance with HSPPS and goals.

Programs need to finish gathering data so they can aggregate and analyze their assessment results three* times each year. Home visitors should plan with families when the best times will be for their child to conduct any direct assessments the program uses.

Education staff will also plan when to assess based on the classroom schedule. If using an observation-based assessment instrument, staff should observe and document children's knowledge and skills when children are most likely to use them. For example, staff might observe gross motor skills during outdoor play. They might observe language skills during free play and literacy skills in the literacy corner.

3c. How to assess.

Identify the assessment strategies that staff will use. Observation-based assessment instruments require an observation system and records of children's skills during familiar routines and learning opportunities. Assessment strategies that staff typically use in classrooms, family childcare settings, or in home-based settings include collecting anecdotal records, checklists, work samples, and videos or photos. In addition, staff should gather information from families. It is important that programs train staff in all these strategies and offer supports, such as job aids or coaching, so staff can implement these strategies effectively.

---

* Except in programs operating fewer than 90 days

Observation-based assessment is also referred to as [authentic assessment](). As defined by Snyder, McLaughlin, & McLean, staff use authentic assessment when they observe and interact with children during routine activities—gathering information to document their knowledge and skills (Snyder et al., 2014a). Typically, an authentic assessment instrument covers a range of development indicators. Based on ongoing assessment data from observations and interactions with children in a classroom or home, assessors rate children's levels of development across major development domains. Authentic assessment instruments compare current skill levels to normative data, so staff can see how children's current levels relate to other children. Staff measure individual growth and development over time. They can summarize information and provide data about program goals, as required by the HSPPS [1302.102 (a)–(c)]. Staff can also summarize data for specific populations—such as children with suspected delays or identified disabilities, children in specific age ranges, or children who are dual language learners—or for individual classrooms and settings.

If your program is not already using an authentic assessment tool, the planning team might investigate authentic assessment and direct assessment tools to determine which will meet the program's needs. The planning team might investigate which authentic assessment instrument meets the program's needs. Regardless of whether they use an authentic or direct assessment instrument, the team must ensure that it will yield valid and reliable scores for the children in the program. They must also make sure that the content is aligned with ELOF domains and domains in the state ELDS.

Validity and Reliability

When deciding on an assessment tool, it is important to consider its validity and reliability.

Validity: Evidence that supports the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences made or actions taken from scores derived from an assessment (AERA et al., 2014; Messick, 1993; Snow & Van Hemel, 2008).

Reliability: The consistency or accuracy of assessment scores over time, raters, items, or people (AERA et al., 2014; Snow & Van Hemel, 2008).

HSPPS related to assessing children who are dual language learners.

HSPPS §1302.33(c)

(2) If a program serves a child who speaks a language other than English, a program must use qualified bilingual staff, contractor, or consultant to:

(i) Assess language skills in English and in the child's home language, to assess both the child's progress in the home language and in English language acquisition;

(ii) Conduct screenings and assessments for domains other than language skills in the language or languages that best capture the child's development and skills in the specific domain; and,

(iii) Ensure those conducting the screening or assessment know and understand the child's language and culture and have enough skill level in the child's home language to accurately administer the screening or assessment and to record and understand the child's responses, interactions, and communications.

(3) If a program serves a child who speaks a language other than English and qualified bilingual staff, contractors, or consultants are not able to conduct screenings and assessments, a program must use an interpreter in conjunction with a qualified staff person to conduct screenings and assessments as described in paragraphs (c)(2)(i) through (iii) of this section.

4. Special considerations when preparing for ongoing assessment.

One−third of children in Early Head Start and Head Start are dual language learners (DLLs), meaning that they are learning their home language and learning English at the same time. The planning team will need to ensure that staff use the ongoing child assessment system appropriately with children who are DLLs. The HSPPS include standards about assessing children who are DLLs. See Standards §1302.33(c)(2) and (3) in the box above and in Appendix F.

4a. Gather information from families.

Before assessment of children who are DLLs, it is important to understand their language and cultural backgrounds. The DLLPA provides guidance to support programs in implementing culturally and linguistically responsive assessment practices. Programs can also use the resource Gathering and Using Language Information That Families Share, which includes questions for families related to their language backgrounds and their children's language experiences.

4b. Find staff or interpreters who can speak the home languages of children who are DLLs and their families.

Interpreters should understand cultural differences that may exist for families and children. For example, in some cultures, it's unusual for adults to ask children "what is this?" when pointing to objects or pictures in a book. Children from those cultures may not answer these questions—not because they don't know the answer—but because it's strange for an adult to ask that. Find more information in the Inviting and Supporting Cultural Guides and Home Language Models Tip Sheet.

Published home language surveys from curriculum developers or community partners (e.g., school districts) can also provide language information. These language surveys are usually brief. They offer preliminary information on children's experiences with their home languages and English. The program may also develop its own intake forms to collect in-depth information on children's language and learning experiences.

NATIONAL CENTER ON
Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning

Early Childhood
National Centers

16

ONGOING CHILD ASSESSMENT:
A GUIDE FOR PROGRAM LEADERS

4c. Gather child assessment information in the child's home language and in English.

To gain a full understanding of children's learning, it is important to collect ongoing assessment information in their home language when possible. Bilingual and bicultural staff or interpreters can help with the collection of ongoing assessment data. They can work together with education staff in the learning environment to plan for and implement culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment practices. They can also support interpretation of assessment questions and communication of assessment information to families.

4d. Ensure that standardized or normed assessments have appropriate procedures.

If your program is planning to use a standardized or normed assessment instrument, determine whether the children who are DLLs in your program are included in the normative sample. If not, interpret scores carefully. Additionally, staff should follow different procedures when administering to children with different language or cultural backgrounds than those of the normative sample. The instrument should specify those procedures in manuals or other accompanying documentation. For more information on using assessments with children who are DLLs, see Appendix C.

> ### Resource Highlight
>
> For more information about screening dual language learners: Screening Dual Language Learners in Early Head Start and Head Start: A Guide for Program Leaders

4e. Prepare for ongoing assessment for children with suspected delays or identified disabilities.

At least ten percent of children enrolled in each Head Start program are children who qualify for disability services under IDEA. These children have individualized education programs (IEPs) or individualized family service plans (IFSPs). The planning team must ensure that staff can appropriately gather assessment information for children with IFSPs or IEPs. At the beginning of the year, when education staff review children's information, they should be aware of the child's current skills, the child's disability, and the child's performance levels as described in the IFSP or IEP.

Children with IEPs or IFSPs may need accommodations at home or in the classroom to be independent. The early interventionist or early childhood special educator can work with physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, or other special education personnel to identify individualization strategies for the classroom or home. Learn more about learning environments at https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/children-disabilities/article/environment.

Talk with each child's family and carefully review the goals in their child's IEP or outcomes in their IFSP. Break down IEP goals or IFSP outcomes so the child's learning targets are challenging, but achievable. Most IEP goals are skills the child could attain within 12 months. IFSP outcomes are skills the child could attain within 6 months. Staff need to break down IEP and IFSP skills into smaller steps so they can begin assessing and teaching. When the child acquires the first skill, staff begin working the next step.

Have staff observe for learning targets from the IEP or IFSP continuously, rather than periodically throughout the year. More information about identifying and using learning targets for children with disabilities is in Appendix D.

5. Plan to involve families.

Families observe and interact with their children every day. They are an essential source of information about what their children typically do at home or in other community-based settings. Support education staff in engaging families in the assessment process by creating systems for regular communication between families and education staff about children's knowledge and skills. Intentionally including families in the ongoing assessment process helps them learn to advocate for their children. Encourage education staff and families to share information about children's development related to the domains in the ELOF and their interests at home and at school. For children who are DLLs, gather information about the child's language experiences. Learn more in the resource [Gathering and Using Information That Families Share](). For children who have disabilities, gather information about the child's disability, goals or outcomes in the child's IFSP or IEP, and any information specific to the child's disability.

Education staff should communicate with the family about their child's skills, interests, and needs throughout the year. Share information about the child's initial status and progress with the family after each formal assessment. Staff training should include ways to facilitate ongoing, bidirectional communication with families. For example, it is important to know what communication mechanism is best for each family. You may choose to text, e-mail, call, keep a "traveling" notebook, or other options. Communication between staff and the families about their children's growth and development is a valuable piece of the ongoing assessment process.

For home-based programs, it is especially important to engage families in the ongoing assessment process. Between home visits, families can observe and document the knowledge and skills their children use at home throughout the day. This information can be shared during home visits and can be documented by home visitors as part of their ongoing assessment data.

6. Plan professional development, ongoing implementation support, and fidelity checks.

The planning team also develops a professional development system and include implementation supports needed by the education staff to conduct ongoing assessment.

6a. Professional development should include the skills needed to conduct ongoing assessment.

- **What to assess:** The planning team can develop a system to help staff identify what to assess. They include the system in professional development. It is important to start ongoing assessment when children first enter a program or move to a new setting. Education teams review existing information to determine each child's developmental level relative to the ELOF. After the initial cycle of ongoing assessment, staff focus on children's most advanced skills in each goal to establish learning targets. These initial learning targets are the basis for instruction and assessment.

- **How to assess:** When using an observation-based assessment instrument, staff observe and interact with children. Staff may use anecdotal notes, checklists, tally marks, work samples, and video or pictures to document what they observe. Staff also engage families in the assessment process by regularly sharing documentation and asking families to contribute their own observations. Everyone on an education team should be able to use these strategies in early learning settings and during socializations. Only trained staff should use a direct assessment.

- **Where and when to assess:** Home visitors and education teams need to be strategic in planning where and when to assess children. Developing a planning matrix might help teams identify what targets to assess in which children during which activities and routines.

- **How to enter data:** Staff collect written notes, tally marks, checklists, and pictures. Then staff carefully encode and enter them into a data collection system. The data helps them find instruction targets for groups and individual children.

6b. Provide professional development and follow-up implementation supports.

After staff receive training, introduce a personalized implementation support system that includes resources and coaching. A knowledgeable and skilled coach or child development specialist who understands ongoing assessment might regularly spend time in each classroom or with each family childcare provider or home visitor to help them bring ongoing assessment from workshop training into their settings.

6c. Implement fidelity checks.

For staff to be effective, programs need to provide training and implementation supports, such as coaching, and systematically making sure staff use assessment instruments with fidelity. While training, explain and establish a system of fidelity checks to ensure that staff monitor fidelity throughout the year. Supervisory staff and coaches who have recurring visits with teaching teams, providers, and home visitors are in the best position to implement fidelity checks. These staff need to be trained in the assessment process. To conduct a fidelity check, the supervisor observes the assessor to make sure he or she has appropriately recorded the child's behavior and correctly scored the assessment tool.

6d. Data entry and storage.

The planning team should develop a plan for entering and storing data. Planning for data entry is important and contributes to higher quality data. When education staff have adequate time to enter data into an online ongoing assessment system, they are more likely to enter accurate and relevant data. Planning for storage includes ensuring that data are secure and that there are policies in place for archiving data once children leave the program.

- **What materials and time do you need?** Consider the materials teachers and home visitors need to collect and organize data (file folders, stick-ems, cameras, computers, etc.). Include adequate time for staff to implement assessment strategies, organize data, and enter data.

- **How will you enter and organize data?** Train staff on data entry, security, and privacy as specified in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Include expectations for ethical collection and use of data. Coach staff on data entry, if they would benefit from additional support. Check fidelity for each person who is entering data.

- **What will your timelines look like?** Include a timeline with observation phases, data entry deadlines, and a timeline for fidelity checks. The timeline should mark periodic program-wide data analysis dates and review meetings.
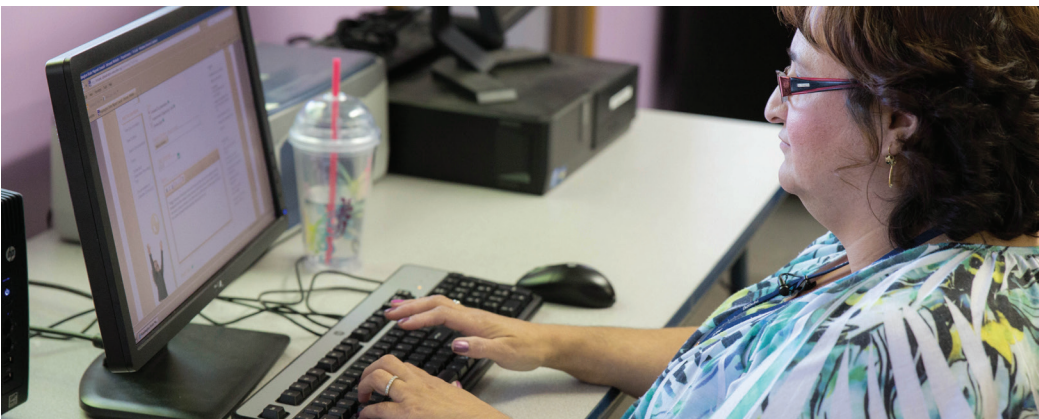
While training, explain and establish a system of fidelity checks to ensure that staff monitor fidelity throughout the year.

Case Story

Juanita is the director of the Westcott Head Start program, which serves preschool children in center-based settings and uses home visiting for children from birth to age 3. Since becoming director, Juanita has been working with program directors and education managers to establish a grantee-wide ongoing child assessment system. They have a meeting schedule where they plan for and discuss ongoing child assessment practices. Meetings include monthly video calls, quarterly in-person meetings, and between-meeting e-mails when questions pop up. Everyone is working together to plan the system. They will start work on it in the spring, so everything will be ready when the new year starts in the fall. A grantee-wide planning team (which includes program directors, education managers, coaches, a data coordinator, a disabilities coordinator, teaching and home visiting staff, and family engagement staff) will begin meeting in February to plan ongoing child assessment for the following year. The planning team decided it was important to invest in an observation assessment instrument that is closely aligned with the ELOF.

Westcott Head Start has four preschool centers and home-based services for infants and toddlers. While all programs are in the same rural area, the programs are different depending on staff's specific needs. Juanita identified teaching teams within her program. Teams consist of the teaching staff in each classroom and the home-based staff, plus additional staff who serve the children and families, like the family engagement specialist and disabilities services manager. Juanita established a series of meetings throughout the year that include individual team meetings and all-staff meetings. This system helps Juanita support her staff.

Education staff receive training on ongoing assessment strategies each year. Training includes records, checklists, work samples, and videos. The staff also received training on partnering with family members to collect ongoing assessment information in the home. Two years ago, staff received additional professional development on assessing children who are dual language learners (DLLs). Juanita established a DLL assessment team, which coordinated assessments and bilingual staff that assisted with ongoing assessment. Last year, staff received extra training about ongoing assessment with children with disabilities. Staff practiced breaking down IFSP outcomes and IEP goals into smaller steps.

In addition to training on documentation strategies, staff receive yearly training on their ongoing assessment tool. This training includes technical aspects—updates to the online tool and app, data entry, and planning to set up, manage, and use data. They also learn to accurately score children based on the documentation they collect. Home-based staff worked together to design protocols for collecting and documenting assessment information, based on their home visit and socialization schedules. This training is key, and Juanita encourages her education staff to use data to support the scores and attribute them to the correct learning domains.