Written records that objectively describe children’s abilities and progress are the basis for planning curriculum, communicating with families, and tracking children’s development. Adapt these observation strategies to fit any group of young children.

Anecdotal Records: Valuable Tools for Assessing Young Children’s Development

Laura McFarland

January 21, 2006
Area of Development: Cognitive
Sammy D., 2 years 9 months
Sammy spent 15 minutes exploring color paddles during indoor free-play. She held the yellow paddle on top of the blue paddle and asked Devon, who was standing nearby, “What color do they make? They make green!”

April 27, 2006
Area of Development: Large Motor
Sammy D., 3 years
Sammy climbed into the large wagon without help. She lifted her right leg into the wagon and then her left. After Arianna pulled Sammy around in the wagon for 5 minutes, she climbed out by herself.

Assessment involves observing and documenting children’s development, their learning experiences and relationships, and how they interact with the world around them. The purpose of assessment is to gather meaningful information about children in order to make informed decisions to benefit their education and development (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Jones, 2004). Common observational techniques include:

- narrative records of observations
- checklists
- rating scales
- time sampling (recording the frequency of specific behaviors)

Using a combination of assessment techniques is generally best to gain a fuller understanding of the child (Heidemann, Chang, & Menninga, 2005). Observational narrative techniques, sometimes called anecdotal records, can result in a rich array of developmental information about individual children that can be used in a variety of ways. Anecdotal records inform teachers as they plan learning experiences, provide information to families, and give insights into identifying possible developmental delays (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Cicchetti & Wagner, 1990; Dodge, Heroman, Charles, & Maiorca, 2004).

An anecdotal record is a detailed descriptive narrative recorded after a specific behavior or interaction occurs (Beaty, 1986). Thus, when a teacher observes children engage in a behavior that sheds light on their development, the behavior is recorded in detail. This anecdote can then be filed and referred to later for a variety of purposes (Jones, 2004).

Anecdotal records. A detailed descriptive narrative recorded after a specific behavior or interaction occurs (Beaty, 1986).

Assessment. Observing and documenting children’s development, the work they do, and how they do it, with the goal of gathering meaningful information about the child in order to make educational decisions that will benefit the child (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Jones, 2004).

Observation. Watching what happens in order to learn more about children (Dombro, Jablon, & Dichtelmiller, 2000).

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Why Keep Anecdotal Records?

Although anecdotal records can be time consuming to record and refer to, the advantages are that they provide naturalistic, detailed, and meaningful information about children's individual development in all domains (Puckett & Black, 1993). They are a valuable source of information to use in a variety of ways in the early childhood classroom, as outlined here.

Inform Emergent Curriculum Planning

Teachers who plan learning experiences based on the skills and interests of individual children, as well as the group as a whole, are using an approach called emergent curriculum. This approach enables teachers to build on and enhance children's play themes, making their learning richer and more complex (Jones & Nimmo, 1994).

It is often difficult to decide what explorations to plan, especially if there is a wide range of developmental abilities among the children in the classroom. How does a teacher decide which puzzles to put on the shelf or which group learning experiences to offer? Anecdotal records are ideal for making decisions about emergent curriculum.

Careful observation of children's behaviors, skills, and interests are essential for planning an appropriate curriculum that will be meaningful and beneficial to children (Dodge et al., 2004). For example, a teacher may decide to add firefighter hats and steering wheels to the dramatic play center after observing that several children repeatedly pretended to be firefighters during outside play time. Building on this firefighting interest enables children to more fully explore their play theme, supporting their cognitive, language, and social skills in the process.

Emergent curriculum also involves providing ways to enhance children's skills in all developmental domains (social/emotional, language, cognitive, and motor), particularly focusing on skills that a child may need to develop further (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). Keeping track, through observation and anecdotal record keeping, enables teachers to document children's skills that may need enhancement. For example, a teacher may plan a balance beam activity on the playground to foster body awareness after noticing that a particular child falls frequently when running. A teacher may provide a variety of sizes and shapes of writing materials for a child who has trouble gripping a pencil.

Anecdotal notes taken daily can provide a teacher with a deeper understanding of children's interests and skills. Without any type of assessment or record keeping, it is often difficult for teachers to remember the specifics of what children were doing the week before. Careful documentation about what is happening in the classroom with each child enables a teacher to gain important insight on children's development and needs (Dodge et al., 2004).

It is important to observe and purposefully document examples of children's behaviors that will provide rich and meaningful information about the children. Being able to read through anecdotes each week can help teachers be aware of how children are progressing in all developmental domains, and plan accordingly.

Enhance Communication With Families

Clear, detailed communication with families is essential. Careful observation of children's behavior and development is the most important way to gather information about children (Dombro et al., 2000). Teachers rely on anecdotal records to keep families informed about their children's progress, both during daily communication and at parent/teacher conferences.

Reviewing children's records regularly can aid teachers in sharing specific and accurate information with families about their children's interests, developing skills, and challenges. In
preparation for parent/teacher conferences, many teachers use their anecdotal records to create children's developmental profiles. These profiles summarize the child's skills in all developmental domains, as well as identify the child's strengths and challenges. After reviewing the summary, families are encouraged to discuss any concerns. Anecdotal records may also be contained in children's portfolios, which include photographs, examples of their art work, dictations, and other concrete evidence of their progress (Puckett & Black, 1993).

Some teachers find it helpful to ask families a week or two before conferences about any issues they would like to discuss. This allows time to read through anecdotes and to record new ones in any areas about which parents want to know more. This strategy also supports teamwork and collaboration among families and teachers (Seplocha, 2004).

When meeting with families, start off by describing positive examples of a child's development to put everyone at ease and establish a positive connection. Seplocha (2004) suggests using anecdotes of something the child did or said recently as a good way to begin the conference. Parents appreciate concrete examples of how their children are progressing and value the effort it takes to understand and meet the developmental needs of their children.

Track Development and Identify Possible Delays

Anecdotal records are one of the most useful ways to track children's development over time (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992). For example, a preschooler's scissor-cutting skills can be examined and recorded in September, then again in November and February to note improvements. Anecdotes can help determine whether a child who often resorted to physical aggression to resolve disputes with peers in August is better able to negotiate with words in March. Without records, the specifics of how each child is progressing (or not progressing) in each developmental domain can be lost.

Document children’s skills that may need enhancement.

Children who lack appropriate progression in particular areas over time can be identified by referring to anecdotal records regularly. For example, 2-year-old Lindsey’s language abilities seemed to be lagging compared to her peers. At the beginning of the school year, her parents expressed concern that Lindsey’s language was immature. The teacher expected that Lindsey would catch up to her peers, and that she was just a late bloomer, and failed to keep any anecdotal records.

The next year, as Lindsey moved into the 3-year-old class, her parents again expressed concern about her language development. Lindsey’s new teacher vowed to take careful notice of how her language progressed over the next few months. In September the teacher recorded examples of Lindsey’s speech structure and pronunciation: “Jah!” for “Johnny,” “Bue Dah” for “blue dolphin.” With these detailed notes, the teacher was able to understand more about Lindsey’s language development. It was clear she mostly spoke in one- or two-words phrases, and her pronunciation was difficult to understand.

In January, Lindsey’s teacher noticed that the speech examples had not changed much since the start of the school year. Lindsey was still speaking in two-word phrases and her peers could not understand her. It was clear that her speech was delayed and needed attention. After careful review of Lindsey’s anecdotal records in the motor development area, her teacher also noticed that her large- and fine-motor development was closer to the skill level of a 24-month-old, rather than a 42-month-old child. Lindsey could not pedal a trike and needed help walking down the ramp on the playscape.

This teacher’s careful observations proved to be invaluable in making referrals to a speech therapist and neurologist who then began to pinpoint Lindsey’s delays more precisely. If anecdotal recording of Lindsey’s progress had been used a year earlier, intervention could have been implemented much sooner.
Recommendations for Recording Anecdotes

The most accurate and useful anecdotal records

- address all areas of development
- are objective
- include details
- are reviewed regularly

Follow these practical guidelines to make sure written records contain pertinent information about children’s development.

Record facts and exactly what happened.

Address All Developmental Domains

Make sure that all developmental domains are observed as equally as possible over the course of time. Some teachers focus on one area of development each day or week. For example, on Monday, record examples of motor development. On Tuesday, look for indicators of children’s social development. Periodically tally what areas have been observed for each child, and then focus on gathering more information in the less complete areas. A few suggestions about what to look for are offered here.

Social/emotional. Document the levels of peer play each child typically engages in: solitary, parallel, associative, or cooperative. Notice how much time the child spends in each type of play. The nature of children’s peer relationships can also be documented. Observe changes in who children interact with, the way children initiate play with others, and how they negotiate conflict with peers. Note the ways in which children express emotion and the range of emotions they express. Do they use words to deal with difficulty, conflict, or frustration, or do they rely on physical prowess or some other means? How well do children cooperate with teachers and peers? How able are they to self-regulate?

Language. Language development is particularly important to document in toddlers and young preschoolers because their language skills are rapidly developing. For very young children, record new words they are learning, their early two-word phrases, and then more complex sentences. Also note pronunciation clarity or any difficulties with pronunciation.

With older children, notice complexity of sentences, ability to use language in social situations, and ability to refer to past and future events. You may also want to ask children what they think about a particular topic and record their answers. For example, ask 2-year-olds what their favorite animal or food is. For older children, ask about more complex things such as what they did over the weekend or even what they like or dislike about their school (Godfrey & Cemore, 2005).

Cognitive. Document how infants and toddlers observe and interact with people and objects. Do they look for a toy when it is dropped, or remember a teacher’s face from the day before? For older toddlers and preschoolers, important milestones may include color, number, and letter recognition, counting, and number/letter sequencing.

Other skills to document include classification, sorting and grouping of objects, ability to take others’ perspectives, reasoning abilities, memory, and attention span. Record information about children’s interests in book reading, art, dramatic play, and using manipulatives.

Examples of children’s creative thinking are also important to record. Creative children use previously gained knowledge to think in spontaneous and unique ways (Smith, 1996). For example, are children using materials in new and different ways or coming up with unique ideas to create play themes? Using scraps of collage fabric to make clothes for dolls and turning a simple cardboard box into a spaceship are both examples of creativity.

Large and fine motor. Observe and record children’s skills as they learn to grasp and reach for objects, pull up, crawl, walk, climb, run, jump, and balance. For older children, observe how they become aware of their own physical limitations and how they challenge themselves physically. Be aware of children’s endurance and activity levels. Throwing, catching, kicking, jumping rope, pedaling, and reaction time are other skills to record.

Fine-motor skills to focus on during anecdotal note-taking include stacking blocks, stringing beads, putting pegs into a peg board, putting together and taking apart manipulatives, zipping, buttoning, tying, pouring, and using utensils.

Pay close attention to the way children hold and use writing materials such as pencils and crayons. Do they use a fist grasp, or a three-fingered pencil grip? Do they draw or paint with large strokes, or begin to label their work? If children’s endurance and activity levels.

Remain Objective

Record just facts and exactly what happened in anecdotal notes. Avoid judgmental language and labeling behavior with words such as mean, nice, and delayed. Simply record the behavior (Puckett & Black, 1993). Also, avoid interpreting children’s intentions. For example, instead of
“Susie purposely knocked down Jose’s block structure. She has a bad temper,” write “Susie was walking toward the block shelf. She saw Jose’s structure, walked to it, and kicked the side. She then walked quickly to the library area.”

This anecdote can later be reviewed by the teacher, who can use it as the basis for future observations and possibly making interpretations about how to proceed. Perhaps this is Susie’s way of initiating play with Jose? If so, use this information to form a plan as to how to help Susie with her social initiation skills.

**Record Details**

Detailed observations are far more helpful than vague descriptions (Puckett & Black, 1993). For example, record the type of block children were building with, the name of the book they asked to read over and over, which hand they held the pencil in, and how long they were engaged in an activity.

**Review Notes Regularly**

Set aside time each week to read records from the previous week, even if it is just 5 minutes. Make sure all children are being observed and that all developmental domains are being assessed.

**Choose a System That Works**

The most accurate way to record notes is to write down details as events happen, or at least keep a notebook handy to jot down notes that can be expanded after class or during planning or nap time (Dichtelmiller, 2004). That way, children’s important accomplishments and major insights are not forgotten (Dombro et al., 2000). In classrooms with young infants or with few staff, finding opportunities to make anecdotal notes can be especially challenging, but the records are invaluable in understanding children’s development.

These three methods and formats can be adapted to fit almost any teaching situation. Teachers are encouraged to use technology—such as digital recorders, cameras, and computers—in much the same way.

**Index Cards Based on Key Words**

One way to record observations is to write a full description of the child’s behavior on an index card. File the cards in an index card holder with a section for each child. This is how an index card system might work.

A teacher noticed that a child who typically gets frustrated easily successfully completed a challenging shape sorter without getting upset. She jots down a few key words in a notebook: “Jack, shape sorter, remained calm.” During nap time, she wrote the following full description on an index card.

October 2, 2006
Area of Development: Social/emotional
Jack S., 3 yrs., 2 months

Jack was working on a new, more difficult shape sorter. The sorter contained a circle, square, and two different sizes of triangles. He placed the circle and square in those holes immediately. After the fourth try, he got the triangles in the correct holes. He remained calm and showed little frustration while experimenting with their placement. He smiled as he put the sorter back on the shelf.

**File Folders With Stickers**

For teachers who would rather write the entire observation as it actually occurs, a file folder system for each child may be preferable. Each child’s folder contains four sheets of paper, titled with develop-
mental domains (cognitive, language, social/emotional, and motor). Some teachers combine cognitive and language, or separate out social and emotional.

Teachers who use this type of system keep a sheet of peel-off mailing labels on a clipboard that can easily be carried around or at least kept within close reach. To record a behavior, simply write the observation directly on the label. Later, peel off the labels with the observations and stick them on the appropriate sheets in each child’s file.

The advantage of using this method is that observations are recorded as they happen, rather than taking time later to write them. Labels are quick and easy to file, and they give a clear, progressive picture of the child’s development over time on one sheet of paper. The disadvantage is that it can be difficult to record detailed notes as events happen. In that case, the labels can be used as prompts for writing full observations later. If more space is needed, just use two or more labels.

**Photo Record of Development**

**Language Development**

Margie D.

Birthday: 2/17/03

9/29/06 Margie filled a bucket with wet sand, turned it over and said “I made a pancake!”

10/4/06 Margie gave Charles a ball he dropped and said, “I just got Charles’ ball. I gave it to him.”

10/20/06 Margie was listening to the story “Polar Bear Polar Bear” with the group. When asked how polar bears go under water, she replied, “They close their eyes and hold their noses.”

11/3/06 Carly showed Margie some ladybugs in the garden. Margie said excitedly, “They’re so pretty, ladybugs!”

**Pictures With Captions**

Photographs are another excellent way to document children’s development. Teachers can photograph children as they observe a significant behavior and then write a description of what is going on in the photograph.

This method provides very rich, visual information about each child’s development. Using a digital camera, printing small photos or using video clips, and keeping records in computer files can help keep time and expenses to a minimum. Photographs can also be used to prepare displays, such as documentation panels, to highlight the important learnings that are taking place in the classroom!

**Photo Record of Development**

Carlos J.

11/3/06

Insert photo here

Area of Development: Social

Carlos spent about 4 minutes setting the table. He called out to the other children “Pizza is ready!” Julie and Jackson sat down at the table with Carlos. They pretended to eat pizza together. Carlos asked, “Would you like some juice?” He pretended to pour juice for everyone.

* * *

Keeping anecdotal records is an important responsibility for early childhood professionals. Careful, regular recording of children’s development has many benefits for teachers, families, and children. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these and other recording methods.

**References**


Put These Ideas Into Practice!

Anecdotal Records: Valuable Tools for Assessing Young Children’s Development

Laura McFarland

What are anecdotal records?
Anecdotal records are clear, accurate, objective, and detailed descriptions of a child’s behavior. Observations are recorded, filed, and reviewed regularly by teachers and children’s families.

Developmental Domains to Observe
- social
- emotional
- physical
- cognitive
- language

Observational Techniques
- narrative records of observations
- checklists
- rating scales
- time sampling
  (recording the frequency of specific behaviors)

Uses for Anecdotal Records
- curriculum planning
- parent communication
- track development
- help identify possible delays

Although anecdotal records can be time consuming to record and refer to, the advantages are that they can provide naturalistic, detailed, and meaningful information about children’s individual development in all domains.

Ways to Use This Article for Staff Development
1. Review the techniques described in the article. Discuss the merits of each. Choose which methods to adapt and try.
2. Over the course of a few weeks, try out each anecdotal record system. Discuss the pros and cons of each technique. Teaching teams decide which method will work best for them.
3. Talk about observational techniques with teachers in other classrooms or at other schools. Discuss problems encountered and how they were solved.
4. Ask parents how useful they found their children’s anecdotes in better understanding their children’s developmental progress. Ask for suggestions about ways anecdotes could be made more valuable to them.

Note: Dimensions of Early Childhood readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.