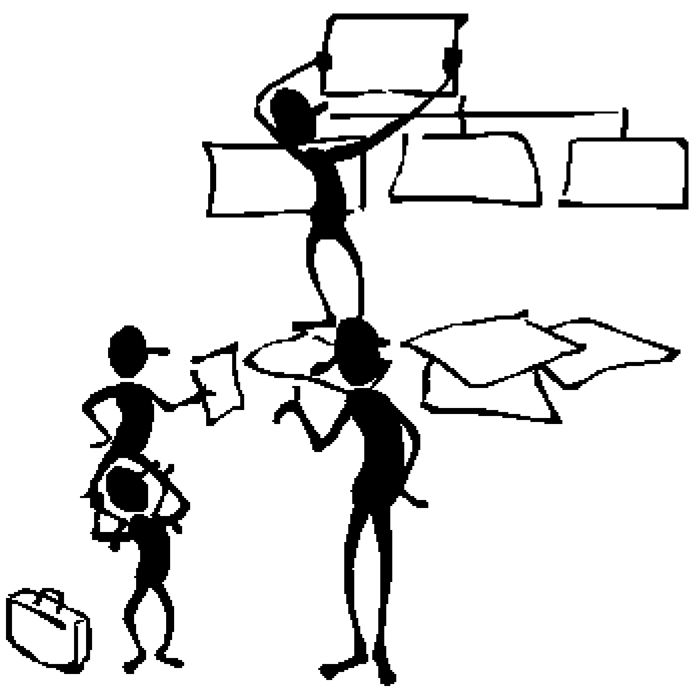
PART III

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ASSESSMENT

REPORT WRITING CRITERIA

Part III of this technical assistance document provides a history of the development of the criteria for early childhood assessment report writing. It describes the formation of a Learning Community in report writing and the development of a vision for early childhood reports. It illustrates how the Learning Community developed the criteria that form the core of this document and identifies the principles that the Learning Community used as a foundation for each section of the assessment report. This part briefly outlines how these criteria were reviewed and tested by individuals in New Mexico who write assessment reports for Part B and Part C programs and by consumers of those reports. Finally, this part closes with a listing of individuals involved in the Learning Community in report writing.



The Development of the Assessment

Report Writing Criteria

In the spring of 2001, we formed a Learning Community with participants from Albuquerque Public Schools, Early Childhood Services at the UNM Center for Development and Disabilities, Las Cruces Public Schools, Native American Pueblo Parent Resources (NAPPR), New Mexico State University, and Tresco TOTS. The Learning Community included parents, interpreters, diagnosticians, developmental specialists, teachers, occupational and physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, and physicians. These community members came together because they expressed mutual concerns regarding the quality of assessment reports, expressed interest in learning about how to construct more useful reports, and possessed a collective expertise in various areas of assessment and communication of findings.

DEVELOPING THE VISION

The purpose of a vision statement is to focus attention, to inspire change, and to guide action. During the first session of the Learning Community in Report Writing, the community members came together to study issues in writing early childhood reports and examine guidance from law, regulation, and literature. Through discussion, this Learning Community identified problems that we all have encountered in reports about young children: reports the size of dissertations; lists of services in place of goals and strategies; conflicting expectations about what families need and what service providers (e.g., physicians, occupational therapists, school personnel) need; results driven by test scores instead of functional capacities; content not responsive to families' culture, language, and experiential background.

To criticize is easy. To create a new direction for early childhood assessment reports is more challenging. To begin the change process, members discussed their expectations and contributions, what knowledge and expertise each brings to the table, beliefs about best practice, and desired outcomes. The Learning Community began creating the new direction by examining an evaluation report written on behalf of a child and family who were making the transition from Part C to Part B. Members identified the strengths and weaknesses of the report and engaged in discussion of information that should be excluded or added. They evaluated the report in terms of what was useful to families, service providers, and administrators.

The facilitation team conducted a content analysis of the vision discussion to identify overarching themes and framed themes into a vision statement. We introduced this statement at the second meeting, in June 2001. Members discussed, debated, revised, and edited the statement until consensus was attained.

A Report that Makes Sense

Reports in early childhood reflect the partnership among families and providers and are guided by the families' priorities, questions, and concerns. Reports present a shared vision of the child, convey useful and understandable information, and strike a balance among consumers' needs unique to each child.

The vision generated is what we chose to work toward for early childhood reports, whether they address infants, preschool children, or children in K-3. The vision reflects the desired outcome for all sectors represented in the Learning Community: the families, the early intervention system, the early childhood evaluation system, and the school system. It informed all decision making about what to include in the original guidelines and in this technical assistance document.

DEVELOPING THE CRITERIA

In an effort to generate criteria to guide report writing, we reviewed laws regulations, technical assistance documents, and what little literature exists on report writing. We evaluated reports, identified likes and dislikes, and highlighted useful and relevant information. We debated, discussed, revised criteria, and then tested them against our vision of what an early childhood report should be. We used the audio taped record and our written activities to emerge the criteria to guide report writing. These criteria reflect values held by the Learning Community, the needs served by early childhood reports, and the vision held regarding what early childhood reports could become – wisdom born of practice. The criteria generated compose the majority of Part I of this technical assistance document.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING ASSESSMENT REPORT WRITING

Besides generating the criteria for report writing, the Learning Community also identified principles of report writing linked to the four main sections of a report: background information, procedures and tools, findings, and conclusions and next steps.

Principle #1 is a shared portrait of this child's history.

The background information section should help the reader see the child as a person who has a family and life experiences, not just a case. Through integrating information across sources (family perspectives, records, initial contact), this section should reveal a preliminary picture of this child and what experiences this child brings to the assessment process.

Principle #2 is family priorities.

Much information may have been gathered about the child and the child's family; not all of it should be included in a report. When families have good rapport with other members of the assessment team, they may share information orally that they do not want to see in print later. Report writers need to explain to families how background information will be used and why it is helpful to readers of the report. Families need to be asked what they want included in the background section of the personal information they have shared.

Principle #3 is usefulness.

Each detail included in the background section needs to have a connection to the report as a whole; that is, to the reasons for the assessment, the decisions regarding assessment strategies, the findings, or the conclusions and recommendations. Do not include information merely because it is interesting or because it is traditionally reported. Include only the necessary and helpful details.

Principle #4 is individualization.

In early childhood assessment, concerns and purposes drive decisions on how, where, and when to assess. The procedures and tools section needs to show the connection between family concerns, assessment purposes, and the choices made for procedures and tools. The reader should be able to detect how procedural choices addressed the characteristics of the child (e.g., language used, communication style, interests, sensory and response capacities). Consistent with the increased family role in the reauthorization of IDEA, the section also should reflect the family's chosen level of involvement in the assessment process; for example, that the parent was present during the assessment process and provided comments on the quality or consistency of the child's performance.

Principle #5 is multimethod description.

Early childhood assessment is dependent upon using multiple sources, multiple tools, and multiple occasions or settings to obtain a valid appraisal of child's strengths and needs. Tools might include checklists, documents, environmental inventories, interviews, observations, tests, and video and audiotapes. When assessors use clinical and naturalistic observations, interviews, or rating scales to collect assessment data, they need to include descriptions of these measures in addition to their descriptions of the tests used in the procedures and tools section.

Principle #6 is credibility.

Readers will make judgments about the worth of information in an assessment report based, in part, on how assessors collected that information. The procedures and tools section should document the circumstances of assessment such as who collected information, where the information was collected (e.g., classroom, daycare, home, playground, office), who was present during data collection (e.g., extended family, peers, siblings), and session characteristics (e.g., length, frequency, time of day).

Under some circumstances, the team may need to note specialized training (e.g., training in assessing children who are bilingual, deaf-blind, etc.) When readers judge the procedures and tools as acceptable, they are more likely to use the findings and recommendations.

Principle #7 is relationship to primary concerns.

The findings section should directly and visibly address the family's questions and concerns. Families should not have to search through the findings to locate the answers to the questions they raised. Even when a family expresses the concern as a forecast (when will my child walk?), the issue needs to be addressed clearly and honestly.

Reports may have additional purposes generated during the planning phase of assessment (e.g., current developmental status across domains, preparation for transition). Findings need to be portrayed in a way that provides clear and useful information on these concerns for the reader. When an identified concern will be addressed under separate cover, writers should address that fact; but they still should convey available information on the concern (e.g., reporting fine motor performance within the context of assessing communication and cognition).

Principle #8 is presentation of an individual portrait of the child.

The goal of the findings section is to present the reader with an integrated portrait of this child. The focus needs to be on individual strengths and needs. The findings need to be balanced; findings should not focus on a singular domain nor be presented as a listing of weaknesses, deficits, or test scores. Even when the purpose of a report is to provide information on a single concern (e.g., articulation), findings need to address how the concern influences other developmental areas (e.g., social interaction, friendships, classroom participation, etc.).

Principle #9 is relevant information from multiple sources.

Families and other care providers have important contributions to make to the quality and depth of assessment findings. Families help focus concerns and provide input. Family members also hold perspectives on child strengths, how the child functions within a natural context, and the quality of abilities that are not likely to be revealed within an assessment session. A child who does not jump on command during a Brigance administration may jump on the bed at home. Other care providers can contribute valuable information regarding behavioral variability, coping and social capacities within group routines as well as perceptions of individual capacities and challenges. When sources of information are expanded to include natural contexts, findings can illustrate how the child functions in structured and unstructured situations, compensates for limitations, interacts with peers and siblings, and engages toys and materials.

Principle #10 is connection to primary concerns.

The conclusions and next steps section should address the interpretation of the child's overall performance in relation to the family's concerns, questions, and priorities. Some reports may also draw conclusions regarding the child's performance compared with criteria for categories of eligibility (purpose as initial evaluation), the quality of progress since the last assessment (purpose as progress report), or how patterns of strengths and needs relate to the demands of the next educational setting (purpose as transition).

Principle #11 is understandable and useful guidance.

Regardless of purpose, assessment must lead to improving outcomes for children and their families. The conclusions and next steps section should address concrete suggestions in relation to child's strengths and needs. Suggestions that easily translate to instruction, intervention, and family activities are more likely to be immediately useful for families and service providers. These suggestions need to be realistic and workable within the everyday context.

Principle #12 is coordination of information.

Information can be very difficult to assimilate and retain, especially when the information is new or different from our expectations. Often, we explain well what the assessment findings mean, how families can help their children develop, and what programs and services might help. Seldom do we include the same rich description in the report itself. Having something explained once during a meeting is different from having the information in writing. Careful coordination of suggestions shared orally with those included in the written report eases understanding.

FIELD TESTING AND REVIEW

During the Spring of 2002, we conducted a field test and evaluative review of the New Mexico Guidelines for Early Childhood Assessment Reports. This review process had two objectives: to obtain data on the context and process of implementing the guidelines and to obtain feedback from administrators, diagnosticians, families, and other consumers of reports on the content, clarity, and perceived usefulness of the guidelines. Field testers included professionals involved in report writing from both Part C and Part B programs. Disciplines represented included developmental specialists, educational diagnosticians, pediatric nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, service coordinators, and speech/language pathologists. Field testers attended two, hour-long meetings, completed a site survey of resources for report writing, conducted a self assessment of their own report writing, and developed and implemented a change plan. These steps have been incorporated within Part II of this technical assistance document to assist document users in the change process.

In addition, key informants throughout New Mexico served as reviewers for the guidelines. Reviews included members from Head Start, public schools, and Part C programs. Reviewers received a copy of the guidelines, a review form which they returned to us with their commentary and evaluation. We conducted a content analysis of the information collected during the field test and review. This included a systematic analysis of the feasibility of applying the guidelines in both early intervention and school settings and the barriers and benefits in incorporating the criteria into early childhood assessment reports. We compiled suggested revisions from the field test and review and used them in the creation of this technical assistance document. Finally, we analyzed the resulting revision to ensure compatibility with both the requirements of the early intervention system (Department of Health) and the requirements of the preschool and school-age service delivery system (Department of Education).

THE LEARNING COMMUNITY IN ASSESSMENT REPORT WRITING

The following individuals participated in the creation of the vision for early childhood assessment reports, the generation of criteria, and the identification of guiding principles for report writing.

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