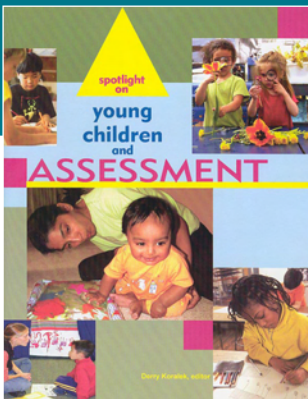Developmentally
Appropriate
Practice

A reading from the CD accompanying
*Developmentally Appropriate Practice in
Early Childhood Programs Serving Children
from Birth through Age 8, Third Edition.*

READING #6

Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum

Diane Trister Dodge, Cate Heroman, Julia Charles,
and Jessica Maiorca

CATEGORIES:
Assessment
All Ages

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Beyond Outcomes

How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum

Diane Trister Dodge, Cate Heroman, Julia Charles, and Jessica Maiorca

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As the public becomes increasingly aware of the potential of early childhood programs to prepare children, especially vulnerable children, for success in school, the pressures on programs to produce positive results have grown. Legislators, boards of education, and funding organizations want to be sure that their investments in early childhood programs are paying off and that children are attaining the standards. For Head Start programs Congress has mandated specific outcomes for preschool children, and standardized tests are being used to determine whether individual programs are achieving the desired results.

At a time when we know so much more about the role of a comprehensive curriculum and ongoing assessment linked to curriculum planning, the danger is that the mandates for outcomes can lead us off in the wrong direction. We must guard against using assessment simply to satisfy mandates and keep in mind how ongoing assessment supports children's learning and leads to meaningful curriculum.

Ongoing assessment is the process of gathering information in the context of everyday class activities to obtain a representative picture of children's abilities and progress. Researchers recommend assessing children based on observations of the processes children use rather than on simple, concrete, disconnected indicators or milestones (Cicchetti & Wagner 1990; McCune et al. 1990; Hauser-Crane & Shonkoff 1995). Data should be collected in a variety of ways: observing and documenting what children do and say;

collecting samples of children's work over time; talking with children to learn more about their thinking; exchanging information with families. The data teachers collect from ongoing assessment enable them to learn more about each child, plan for children's learning, track children's progress, and, when required, generate outcomes reports. Research has shown that when teachers use a comprehensive curriculum and assessment system effectively, children are well prepared for school and do well academically and socially (Campbell et al. 2002; HHS 2003).

The problem is that assessment information is of limited value unless teachers understand what it means and know how to use it to guide children's learning. Too often assessment results are seen as an end product rather than as knowledge that opens the door to learning about each child and to planning meaningful curriculum. Ongoing, classroom-based assessment enables teachers to answer important questions:

• What are children doing and thinking?

• What should I assess?

Once the curriculum is in place, teachers have a context for observing what children can do.

• What did I learn?

• How should I use what I learned to plan the curriculum?

In this article we describe how ongoing assessment can be a manageable and dynamic process directly linked to planning curriculum and supporting each child's learning and development.

What are children doing and thinking? The role of a curriculum

Before teachers can begin to use a systematic approach to assessment, they need to be confident about what is happening in their classrooms. This is where a comprehensive curriculum comes in; it provides the road map for putting the program in place. A comprehensive curriculum grounded in research and child development theory provides a framework for what to teach, how to teach, and how to assess children's learning. Early childhood educators have a responsibility to "implement curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, comprehensive, and likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children" (NAEYC & NAECS/ SDE 2003, 1).

Teachers should be knowledgeable about their curriculum and know how to build a comfortable and engaging learning environment for a group of children. This means, at a minimum,

• getting to know children and families

• setting up a classroom with clearly defined interest areas and well-organized and labeled materials that invite children to explore and discover

• establishing a structure for each day, including a daily schedule and routines, so children know what is expected and experience a sense of order

• helping children learn how to function in a group, relate positively to others, and solve problems peacefully

• helping children build content knowledge and develop the skills and attitudes necessary to be successful learners

Once the curriculum is in place, teachers have a context for observing what children can do as they work in interest areas, participate in large- and small-group activities, and go through the routines of the day. These observations, collected over time, become the basis for decision making. They are the building blocks of assessment. Let's look at an example.

Four-year-olds Maria, Danielle, and Jacob are in the dramatic play area pretending to be at a restaurant. Their teacher writes down the following exchange:

Maria: Can I take your order?

Danielle: Sure, I want spsghetti and meatballs.

Jacob: That's not how you say it! It's spuh-get-e.

Danielle: Spuh-get-e.

Maria: I know what she's saying. Let me write it down. [Maria writes SPGTE and METBLS. Jacob scribbles.] Is that all?

Danielle: Oh, yeah . . . I want some tea too. [Maria writes T. Jacob makes more scribbles.]

Jacob: I'll start cooking and you set the table. [Jacob puts white yarn and red pom-poms in a pot and stirs.]

Documenting what you see and hear enables you to reflect on what you learned about the children and gain valuable insights about each child. The key is to observe purposefully and document examples that provide rich data. This means becoming very familiar with the curriculum's goals and objectives and keeping them in mind when observing children and planning.

What should I assess? Keeping goals and objectives in mind

There are so many different observations teachers could document. How do teachers know which ones will reveal something important about a child? In deciding what to assess, consider these questions:

• What are the goals and objectives of the curriculum I am implementing?

• Which outcomes am I required to gather information about?

• What are the children like individually and as a group?

• Are there specific concerns that need my attention?

Goals and objectives are where you want to take children.
Curriculum is the road map for getting there.
Assessment is a way of ensuring that children are making progress.
A continuum for each objective shows all the steps along the way.

In a comprehensive curriculum, goals and objectives address all aspects of development: cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and physical (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003). Within each developmental area there are broad goals for children's learning.

Cognitive development: children's thinking skills, including the development of logical and symbolic thinking, problem-solving skills, and approaches to learning.

Language development: children's ability to communicate through words, both spoken and written, including listening and speaking, reading and writing skills.

Social/emotional development: children's feelings about themselves, the development of responsibility, and their ability to relate positively to others.

Physical development: children's gross and fine motor skills.

These goals are based on knowledge of child development and widely recognized expectations for preschool children. Goals can be broken down into appropriate objectives. Children learn so much when engaged in meaningful, engaging experiences that it is not practical for teachers to formally assess each and every skill or concept a child has learned. As a result, curriculum developers often struggle with how specific goals and objectives should be. When the goals and objectives are clear and concise yet broad enough to allow children to attain them in many different ways, positive child outcomes can result.

Goals and objectives should also reflect content standards for different disciplines—literacy, math, science, social studies, the arts, and technology—and

Reflection	Related Curriculum Objectives
All the children played cooperatively in the dramatic play area.	Plays well with other children
The children had background knowledge about restaurants and food and applied it to their play.	Applies knowledge or experience to a new context
They used appropriate vocabulary words and expanded sentences in their play. They seemed to understand the rules of a conversation.	Expresses self using words and expanded sentences Actively participates in a conversation
Danielle and Jacob were paying attention to the separate syllables in spoken words.	Hears and discriminates the sounds of language
Jacob made scribbles to represent words. Maria used her knowledge of letter sounds to write words.	Writes letters and words Uses tools for writing and drawing
Jacob used yarn and pompoms to represent spaghetti and meatballs.	Takes on pretend roles and situations Makes believe with objects

writing and art samples, photographs, audio and video recordings—the stronger and more valid your decisions will be.

What did I learn? The value of viewing objectives on a continuum

After you have determined a child's progress in relation to an objective, you can make decisions about appropriate next steps. However, children don't accomplish an objective all at once. They typically go through a series of levels that teachers can anticipate.

address the outcomes requirements and state expectations. Most states have developed, or are in the process of developing, early learning standards for children under five, and the Head Start Outcomes Framework (Head Start Bureau 2001) addresses content standards. A broadly stated objective, such as "Compares and measures," can accommodate more specific federal or state requirements, such as "Identifies longer/shorter." Supporting documentation can demonstrate that a child has an understanding of this concept. Thus, teachers can be confident they are heading in the right direction when implementing a curriculum with broadly stated goals and objectives.

Just as we stay focused on the destination when we use a road map to plan our route, teachers need to keep the curriculum's objectives in mind throughout the day. Prominently displaying the goals and objectives reminds teachers and classroom visitors of the value of the activities children are engaged in at any time of the day. They can observe what children are doing and reflect on specific objectives being addressed.

A brief, factual observation such as the one provided earlier (previous page) offers a great deal of information about the three children, when viewed from the perspective of the curriculum's goals and objectives (see chart, above). Thus this short dramatic play episode serves as a good starting point for assessing what these children already know and can do. Documented observations are among the many pieces of evidence that will lead you to make informed decisions about a child's progress. The more documentation you collect—written observations,

Knowing this developmental sequence and using it to plan for children with a range of abilities opens the door to truly getting to know each child and being able to structure opportunities for learning.

When an assessment system is based on the curriculum objectives and shows a developmental continuum, teachers can more easily pinpoint what a child knows and is able to do. A continuum describes the phases children experience as they move toward accomplishing a given objective. It provides a way of looking at what children can do and how teachers can plan for the next step. Many assessment systems, such as the Creative Curriculum developmental continuum assessment system for ages 3–5 (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman 2001), identify a typical developmental sequence for the stated objectives. In addition, math experts have defined "learning paths" for children ages three to six (NAEYC & NCTM 2002), and literacy specialists describe a continuum for children's development in early reading and writing (IRA & NAEYC 1998). These various continuums allow for the fact that development is uneven, that all children will not be at the same level at the same time

A continuum describes the phases children experience as they move toward accomplishing a given objective.

in all aspects of development, and that children of the same age will exhibit a range of skills that are typical.

As an example, let's use the objective we identified for Maria, Danielle, and Jacob: "Writes letters and words." A continuum might show a sequence of steps for this objective. Based on the sample observation, the teacher can make some preliminary judgments about Maria's and Jacob's progress along the continuum for the curriculum objective "Writes letters and words" (below). Jacob, who uses scribble writing, appears to be at Step 1. Maria, who wrote SPGTE for spaghetti, appears to be at Step 3, "Uses letters that represent sounds in writing words." Both children are engaged in the same play episode, but they are at entirely different stages of development for this objective. Of course, before making a final determination of the skill level, the teacher will collect more evidence related to this objective.

While these steps show a continuum of development for children ages three to five, there are many behaviors that lead up to Step 1 and many steps that follow Step 3. To make assessment more inclusive of those who are not yet at the Step 1 phase, it is helpful to think about the emerging behaviors, sometimes referred to as *precursors* or *forerunners,* that come before Step 1. For the objective "Writes letters and words," some examples of emerging behaviors include

• scribbles with crayons

• experiments with writing tools such as markers and pencils

Children who remain at this stage of development for a given objective may have a developmental delay or may simply lack experience or opportunity, such as using paper and writing tools at home.

In addition, some children may be at the other end of the spectrum and exceed the widely held expectations

> **T**he essence of developmentally appropriate practice is knowing **where children are on a continuum of learning** and then offering them challenging yet achievable experiences to **gently nudge them along the way.**

for most children ages three to five. All teachers want children to progress, no matter what phase of development they are in; there's always a next step. The essence of developmentally appropriate practice is knowing where children are on a continuum of learning and then offering them challenging yet achievable experiences to gently nudge them along the way.

Teachers keep track of a child's progress for a variety of reasons: to be assured that learning and development are taking place, to make children's progress visible to parents, and to make adjustments in their teaching strategies. Keeping track of children's progress in a systematic way also allows you to look at the status of the entire class and how a group of children is progressing.

Once you have mapped a child's or group of children's development on a continuum, you have completed a major step in the assessment process. Now it is time to use what you have learned to inform your teaching.

How should I use what I learned? Planning for each child and the group

The everyday decisions you make—about the activities and experiences you plan, the content you address, the context in which the learning takes place, the changes you make in the environment—are based on your knowledge of each child and of the group as a whole. Deciding how to use your assessment information in the classroom may seem like an overwhelming task. It would be nice to have a handy set of directions or a prescription that would tell you exactly what to do next to achieve a desired result. However, children are not robots we can program for a predictable response. You have to consider many factors, such as a
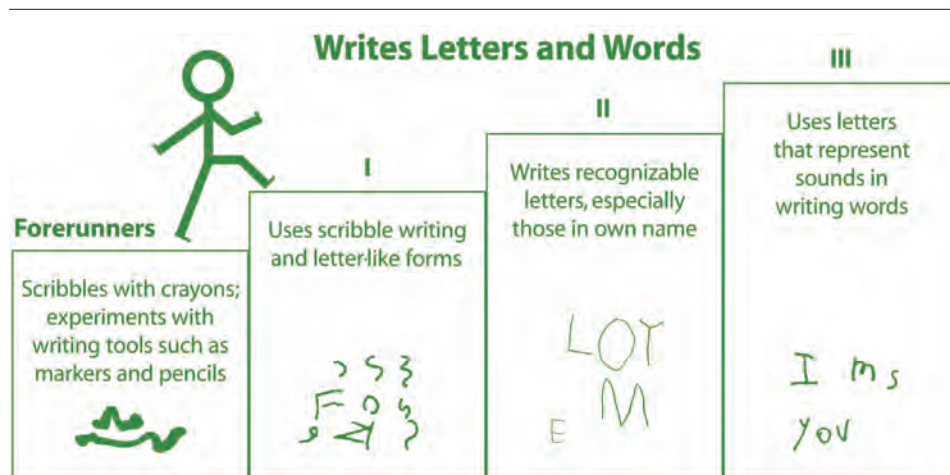
Teaching Strategies, Inc. (2001). The Creative Curriculum® Developmental Continuum for Ages 3–5. Washington, DC: Author. Copyright 2001 by Teaching Strategies, Inc. Reproduced with permission.

At our weekly team meeting, we talked about how the children needed more experiences in writing letters and words. We checked to be sure we had plenty of writing materials not only in the library area but throughout the classroom: paper, crayons, markers, and large pencils; magnet letters, letter stamps, and cards with each child's name. Looking at the continuum for this objective made us realize that a few children would be scribbling with crayons and drawing simple pictures; some would make scribbles that contained letterlike forms; some would write recognizable letters, especially those in their own name; and a few children would be using letters that represent sounds in words. Knowing the sequence for this

objective made us more aware of what to look for as children write and draw during their play.

We can also anticipate what the next step is for every child, so we can help each child make progress. For example, if we notice a child who is beginning to make letterlike forms in his scribbling, we could see if he is aware of this. If not, we could point it out: "Look, Tyrone, you made a mark that looks like a *T*, just like the first letter in your name. Can you make another one like it?" In this way we can encourage a child to become more purposeful about what he is doing. We now have a clearer idea of our role.

child's culture, language, strengths, interests, temperament, and learning style.

It is reassuring to discover that, having used the goals and objectives regularly in observing children and in weekly planning, you are already involved in the assessment process. In planning for each child, keep assessment information handy so you can refer to it frequently. This will remind you of children's strengths and help you anticipate what different children are likely to do with the materials and activities you provide. With this information in mind, you can observe children during their play and respond appropriately.

For example, the teacher knows that Jacob uses scribble writing and letterlike forms. She then reflects

on how she can extend Jacob's learning. What will she do and say that will support him as he moves along the continuum? When Jacob works in other areas of the classroom, she can intentionally offer him writing materials to use in his play: "Jacob, would you like to make an Open sign for your block building?" Or when Jacob wants a turn at the easel, she can ask him to write his name on the sign-up sheet.

The planning process is much more manageable when teaching teams—all those working with a child or group of children—meet together. They can discuss children individually and decide what some logical next steps might be for the child. In addition, a teaching team can review class profiles or summary sheets and make informed decisions about what should happen for the group as a whole. Having used the objectives to decide what materials to display and to plan small- and

large-group activities, teachers can now prepare for children with a range of abilities by keeping in mind the different expectations for each level. See the description on page 14 for an example of how this happens.

By planning with developmental steps in mind, teaching teams are more aware of how to guide children's learning and ultimately accomplish curriculum goals. They can anticipate the needs of children and create as well as adapt materials for a broad range of abilities, to better scaffold learning.

Using assessment to reach every child and family

The most powerful outcome of ongoing assessment is the positive relationships teachers can build with each child. Every child is different, but the one thing every child needs is to feel accepted and appreciated. Some children are easy to get to know and like. They readily draw adults into a positive relationship. Others are more challenging, making it hard for adults to see their positive attributes and build positive relationships. These are the children who need us the most (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman 2002). Research shows that the quality of children's relationships with their preschool teachers is an important predictor of children's future social relationships and academic success in school (Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2000). The systematic approach to observing children opens the door to appreciating each child's unique qualities and strengths. This gives teachers a way to build a positive relationship.

A system of ongoing assessment also helps teachers build a relationship with each child's family. Families are already teachers' partners in caring for and educating their children. They are an invaluable source of information about their children's unique life experiences, special interests and needs, and learning styles. In turn, families want to find out what their children's teachers know about their children and what progress they are making.

The planning process is **much more manageable when teaching teams meet together.**

Most family members don't have a background in child development, and many are unsure about typical expectations for their child's age group. The assessment process provides a wealth of very specific information that teachers can share with families. When family members see how much teachers know about their child and the ways they are supporting their child's development and learning, they gain a greater appreciation for what is happening in the program. In discussing a particular area of development with a family, you can show them the continuum for specific objectives to provide a realistic picture of how children grow and what they might be expected to learn next.

A continuum is important at IEP (Individualized Education Program) meetings where goals and objectives must be written with realistic expectations that a child can meet. Including families in this process builds a true partnership. Family members feel that they have participated in a meaningful way to plan for their child's continued progress. They are also more likely to support their child's learning as they work on the same goals and objectives at home. One preschool teacher at an urban school shares how she partners with families, using a continuum as a resource:

Jamie is a four-and-a-half-year-old child whose family has experienced many changes in housing, jobs, child care, and family structure. Jamie has a very difficult time separating from family members, handling transitions at school, and making friends. She has frequent tantrums and extended periods of crying. To understand Jamie's behavior and what that might be saying to us, we looked at the developmental continuum. In the areas of physical, language, and cognitive development, Jamie displayed rather typical progress. However, in the area of social/emotional development, Jamie demonstrates many skills in the forerunner stage. This revealed to us that the expectations we held for her were unrealistic. With this new information we could plan ways in which to move Jamie step-by-step along the continuum.

One of Jamie's strengths revealed through the assessment process is her ability to create detailed representational drawings and combine colors creatively. Capitalizing on this ability, we will structure activities that invite other children to join Jamie in art experiences. We will use Jamie as the expert, encouraging her to share how she drew her flowers with the other children. We will implement use of visual cues, such as using our picture schedule to ease her through transitions. We will make drawings showing facial emotions and use them as cues to help her identify and label feelings. We will also set up situations through role-playing, observation, and literature to help Jamie build friendships.

To involve Jamie's mother in our planning and to gather more information, we invited her to a conference. Knowing that parents can be sensitive, we began by talking about Jamie's strengths. In discussing the social/emotional objectives, we used the continuum to explain each step and then asked Jamie's mom where *she* saw Jamie. Although there were some discrepancies in where we placed her development on the continuum, for the most part we concurred. We then shared our plans for Jamie in the classroom. Together, we developed a plan of intervention strategies to use at home, and we scheduled a follow-up meeting.

Reporting to others—A last step

As a very last step in the assessment process, the information teachers have gathered and used to plan curriculum and to support each child's learning can be used to report on group progress. As advocates for developmentally appropriate practice, it is important for early childhood professionals to share what children are learning with those outside their programs. This information may be shared with many stakeholders: administrators, government officials, funding organizations, families, and the general public.

A program that is required to report children's progress on specific indicators—as in Head Start or in some states—needs to have a way to connect children's assessment data with these indicators. While this can be done by hand, it can be very tedious and time-consuming. Many comprehensive assessment systems have electronic solutions—either software or online services—to make the task easier. For example, the Creative Curriculum planning and assessment system enables teachers to create electronic portfolios, complete with samples of children's work. A child's progress is then marked on the continuum online. This Internet-based technology offers appropriate activities and strategies to help a child progress to the next step.

A class profile quickly shows teachers the names of children who are at each step on the continuum for each objective. This makes planning for small groups of children more in tune with the needs of the children. Families can share observations of their children online with teachers. Narrative reports summarizing children's progress are simplified using online assessment systems. Online curriculum planning and assessment systems help teachers streamline their work so they can spend more time with children. And the data from assessment generates outcomes reports automatically.

Conclusion

We have described a way to make assessment a natural process of observing what children can do and of planning curriculum to support their learning. Teachers use curriculum objectives to focus their observations of what children can do. Having gathered purposeful observations, teachers can reflect on what they learned and use the data to plan for each child and the group. When assessment is seen as a meaningful and dynamic part of working with young children, and when it is linked to the curriculum, teachers gain the true benefits of ongoing assessment. They are also likely to find teaching more enjoyable, rewarding, and effective.

> **W**hen assessment is seen as a meaningful and dynamic part of working with young children, and when it is linked to the curriculum, teachers gain the true benefits of ongoing assessment.

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6-Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessments Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum.
Although the material you just read is a major part of DAP. Remember it is through close observation and interaction with the individual children in their classrooms that skilled teachers assess where children are and thereby know how to best guide them.

Use the Table Below to Fill in the Blank

1. At a time when we know so much more about the role of a _____ curriculum and ongoing assessment linked to curriculum planning, the danger is that the mandates for outcomes can lead us off in the wrong direction. We must guard against using assessment simply to satisfy mandates and keep in mind how ongoing assessment supports children's learning and leads to meaningful curriculum.

2. The data teachers collect from ongoing assessment enable them to learn more about each child, plan for children's learning, track children's progress, and, when required, _____ outcomes reports.

3. Ongoing, classroom-based assessment enables teachers to answer important questions:
• What are children doing and thinking?
• What should I assess?
• What did I learn?
• How should I use what I learned to plan the _____?

4. Before teachers can begin to use a _____ to assessment, they need to be confident about what is happening in their classrooms. This is where a comprehensive curriculum comes in; it provides the road map for putting the program in place.

5. Once the curriculum is in place, teachers have a context for observing what children can do as they work in interest areas, participate in large- and small-group activities, and go through the _____ of the day. These observations, collected over time, become the basis for decision making. They are the building blocks of assessment.

6. The everyday decisions you make—about the activities and experiences you plan, the content you address, the context in which the learning takes place, the changes you make in the _____—are based on your knowledge of each child and of the group as a whole.

7. _____ children's thinking skills, including the development of logical and symbolic thinking, problem-solving skills, and approaches to learning.

8. _____: children's feelings about themselves, the development of responsibility, and their ability to relate positively to others

9. Goals and objectives should also reflect content standards for different _____—literacy, math, science, social studies, the arts, and technology—and writing and art samples, photographs, audio and video recordings—the stronger and more valid your decisions will be.

10. After you have _____ a child's progress in relation to an objective, you can make decisions about appropriate next steps. However, children don't accomplish an objective all at once. They typically go through a series of levels that teachers can anticipate.

1	curriculum	2	routines
3	environment	4	Cognitive development
5	generate	6	comprehensive
7	Social/emotional development	8	disciplines
9	determined	10	systematic approach

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Overall effectiveness of training (I feel the training was clear and easy to understand)	1 2 3 4 5
The interactive classroom and homework assignments were helpful learning materials	1 2 3 4 5
This subject was useful and I have incorporated the information into my childcare environment	1 2 3 4 5
Overall effectiveness of training	1 2 3 4 5
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I would recommend other providers to attend this training	1 2 3 4 5
The materials used in this training were valuable and relevant (i.e. handouts, books, homework assignments, etc.)	1 2 3 4 5
Please share your comments. We want to include you in our evaluation process	

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What did you like least about this training session/topic?

How can this training be improved?

My learning style is: (please check one)

- ❏ Visual Learner- You learn by seeing and looking.
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What class/topics would you like for us to present as it relates to this training session?

Was the information presented difficult to understand?   Yes   No

Would you like access to monthly childcare updates?   Yes   No

The course materials were well organized?   Yes   No

I received the materials in a timely fashion?   Yes   No

The information will be helpful to me in my position?   Yes   No

Would you consider taking another training offered by Child Care Providers' Helper?   Yes   No

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