

Learning Stories – narratives of the complex ways that children learn

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What are Learning Stories?

Learning Stories are an assessment tool used to describe a child's learning process and are also a way of documenting that learning. Using a storytelling format (known as a 'narrative') to capture the meaningful elements which influence a child's learning process, Learning Stories are particularly effective in illustrating how children cope with challenges, resolve conflicts and persist when faced with difficulty. The elements which can be described in a Learning Story include the child's:

- Interests, strengths and achievements
- Skills, knowledge and feelings
- Interactions with peers and adults
- Family, heritage, culture and community.

Observations of children's learning such as running records and checklists have traditionally identified gaps in development. Learning Stories use a qualitative approach to observing children's learning. This enables educators to use their professional judgement to interpret children's learning habits (known as 'dispositions'), based on the educators' knowledge and observations of children and their interests. Educators recognise the learning that is taking place for children in their play and are therefore able to describe this learning in the context of their play. This helps educators to evaluate and plan for further experiences to extend a child's learning based around their interests and strengths.

Each Learning Story should interconnect, integrate and relate to other stories about the child, as well as with stories about groups of children in the service – they build on one another to create a whole picture of children's learning. This is why Learning Stories are often referred to as a 'credit' rather than a 'deficit' model to assessing children's learning. Ryan explains that:

The child becomes the subject of the story and his learning journey is captured through a description of what he is doing, as well as what he may be feeling. The stories focus on what children can do as opposed to what they can't (2006, 25).

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	3.1-3.7
OSHCQA Principles:	4.1-4.4 and 5.1-5.4
QIAS Principles:	3.1-3.3 and 4.1-4.6

Due to this qualitative and credit approach, Learning Stories become an engaging and positive way of assessing children's development, and recognise the child as a competent and active participant in their learning journey.

The value of Learning Stories

Learning Stories are a holistic approach to assessing and documenting children's learning. They also meet some of the requirements of the Child Care Quality Assurance systems such as:

- Reinforce the importance of play
- Highlight the influence and contribution of family, culture and community
- Value the process of observation, assessment and evaluation when planning for children's experiences
- Promote planning for individuals or groups of children
- Encourage regular and ongoing observations of children's learning
- Make a connection between the learner and their environment
- Identify the child as a capable, active and competent participant in their own learning.

Each story is a reflection of the individual child's learning, and as such, no two stories are the same.

Educators can use the following to document Learning Stories:

- Written or computer generated narratives
- Children's artwork
- Photographs, diagrams or audio/visual recordings.

Before services implement Learning Stories, they should find out how to use them effectively so that they can meet the standards required for Accreditation. Some practical tips to consider include:

- Seek people who are knowledgeable and experienced to deliver training on Learning Stories. For example, contact the Professional Support Coordinator in your state or territory for training opportunities
- Research information about Learning Stories – the references at the end of this article will be helpful
- Find different ways of writing Learning Stories. The New Zealand Ministry of Education's *Kei Tua o te Pae* webpage (<http://www.educate.ece.govt.nz/learning/curriculumAndLearning/Assessmentforlearning/KeiTuaotePae.aspx>) has several real-life examples
- Seek advice from, and network with, those services that have successfully used Learning Stories to meet the standards required for Accreditation
- Introduce Learning Stories gradually over time. Maybe, at first, only one educator with a small group of children in the service uses the new approach. Or introduce Learning Stories over a short period of time, such as a school term, with time set aside to reflect and evaluate the process
- Begin a Learning Story about a child by describing what is being seen and heard. Then share and review the information with colleagues, and work together to plan for experiences which further support the child's learning
- Have regular discussions between colleagues and families about the way you are describing children's learning
- Explain to families that Learning Stories can build an understanding between what happens at home and in the service, and provides families and educators with an insight to how children learn in these different settings.

Example of a Learning Story

Becky usually chooses to play by herself at our centre. We have noticed that another child at the centre, Lauren, who also chooses to play by herself, has taken an interest in Becky. We have tried to support this interest by sitting the two of them next to each other at lunchtimes and pairing them up in music activities.

Becky appears to be responding to Lauren's interest in developing a friendship. When she arrives in the morning, she first settles by herself in the book corner and before long moves on to see Lauren.

Short-term review

Becky is responding to Lauren's interest in developing a friendship. She is becoming involved in Lauren's play and is developing trust in her. Becky obviously still feels more secure with starting her day with something that is familiar to her but is beginning to enjoy the unfamiliar that is evolving with Lauren.

What next?

Continue to encourage this friendship by pairing Becky and Lauren up in group activities and sitting them beside each other. Observe their play, and tune in on an interest that the two may share and extend on this.

(New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2009).

Conclusion

When used effectively, Learning Stories can support educators to reflect on, evaluate, plan for and extend children's learning. They are a useful tool to enrich the learning process for individual and groups of children so they can become 'confident and involved learners' (*Early Years Learning Framework*, 2009, p.3) ■

References and further reading

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