Early care and education professionals have long resisted single-dimensional standardized tests that don’t easily reflect the interplay of a child’s cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and language development. Instead, experienced teachers seek to document children’s learning across all domains authentically—with concrete evidence and purposeful reflection on how each child approaches and masters tasks.

Increasing—and appropriate—focus on family involvement in children’s early education coupled with formal and informal achievement standards has led many teachers to reexamine how they measure and report on children’s learning. It’s no longer acceptable to simply report that Hank builds large block structures, Annie likes to paint, and both need to practice using their words to solve problems.

Authentic assessment demands a demonstration of a child’s achievement with multiple sources of concrete evidence, across all developmental domains, over time. This assessment tells the story of what a child knows, does, and is interested in, and how the child approaches challenges and meets those challenges with unique solutions. Teacher observations, reflections, and descriptions supported by samples of children’s work are authentic and meaningful—to the individual children, their families, and to your planning for each child’s future learning.

**The portfolio—a multi-dimensional tool**

A portfolio is a collection or sample of information that reflects a child’s developmental progress and achievement. It is multi-dimensional, providing as much evidence of physical growth as it does of language use, vocabulary, and approaches to play and friendship.

Portfolios can take different physical forms from individual folders and accordion files to three-ring binders and electronic storage devices like CD-ROM
disks. Choose what’s best for you. Your storage device is likely to improve and change with use, so don’t fret over making it perfect the first time. Documentation and authentic assessment take time to master.

Choose your storage tool and proceed methodically to fill it with evidence of a child’s development. Note that some pieces of evidence are large and bulky, others compact and uniform in size. Avoid being tempted to keep large and small work samples, art, and anecdotal records in different places. Dispersed records are likely to be forgotten or lost when you most want them.

**Documentation and Authentic Assessment Take Time to Master.**

As you begin, ask yourself questions like these:

- **Which tools will I use to record observations?** (See *Texas Child Care Quarterly*, Fall 2011, “Loving’s not enough”) Post-it notes®, index cards, clipboard and pen, and file labels are all options as are digital cameras and video cameras (including those on cell phones). The trick is to be consistent with both observations and documentation maintenance.

- **Where will I store my observations and small work samples?** Expandable files, file crates, file cabinets, hanging files, binders with pockets, photo albums, and DVD/CD storage boxes are all options.

- **Is it necessary to store large work samples separately?** Where? Options include hanging storage files, horizontal shelves, 22-inch-by-28-inch folders. Alternatively, these can be photographed, reduced in size on a copy machine, or scanned to a computer disk.

**The working portfolio**

As in children’s art, it’s the process not the product. An important feature of a portfolio is that it reflects children’s growth and achievement over time. This ongoing process is not simply a report card of where a child is now, but rather it’s the story of how that child got to this place.

For many teachers, collecting and preserving appropriate samples of children’s work is a challenge. In the classroom every day, children choose some activities and are led in others. They are indoors and on the playground. They eat, nap, and wash their hands. They make friends, learn to cooperate, and work at solving problems. How are the varied activities of a day, week, month, or year encapsulated?

A starting point might be to choose one work sample for each child every month covering all areas of the classroom. Imagine the opportunity to have 12 samples, all evidence of how the child has grown and learned over the course of the year.

You might, for example, include a painting (art) and photographs (or sequences of photos) of the child stringing colored beads in order (math), holding an earthworm (science), pedaling a tricycle (physical development), and practicing writing letters. Additionally, you might include pictures of the same activity taken at several points in the year to document an improving skill like brushing teeth or using a fork. Be sure to include some work samples that the child chooses.

For all work samples, be careful to record the date of the activity. Add comments dictated by the child as well as appropriate observations of your own.

**Electronic options**

Electronic and digital tools offer compact storage solutions and the liveliest glimpses of children’s learning. They do, however, demand a steep learning curve for many users. Again, work slowly and methodically, building from the most simple devices like cameras. Move on to more high-tech portfolio options that include video and sound captured and saved with transcribed documentation to a CD.

Build your resources—materials and equipment—staying respectful of your own cost-benefit formula. Remember, you can build a good portfolio without these tools, but like most tools, they make the job easier.

- Digital cameras are increasingly easy to use and are less expensive than cameras that demand separate film and processing purchases. Digital cameras have automatic focus and zoom features that help ensure good images. Instant-delete features allow you to choose the best images and discard the rest. Use a digital camera to take multiple
shots in sequence. You might photograph a toddler’s increasing satisfaction in completing a puzzle or cutting with scissors, for example.

- Video cameras allow you to make short films of children’s interactions with each other and classroom materials.
- Smart phones offer both digital camera and video features. The newest phones have excellent imaging and sound capability.

**NO DOCUMENTATION IS WORTH THE EFFORT WITHOUT SERIOUS REFLECTION.**

- Computers allow you to take advantage of the imaging software that is usually sold with the camera. Learn how to crop, enlarge, reduce, and correct color contrast on your photos. Print and use the images in newsletters, project displays, and individual children’s portfolios. Invite children to dictate their recollection of the work as a tag for the picture.

  Desktop publishing software will help you make displays and annotate pictures. Use the program’s templates for size, font, and lines until you become proficient. Avoid over-the-top designs that detract from the children’s work—and your intention in sharing it.

- Hand-held tape recorders are small and inconspicuous. Some have detachable microphones. Record children’s voices in classroom work areas to reinforce your anecdotal records.

- Color printers are inexpensive and a necessary companion to digital cameras. Save money by foregoing glossy photo paper. Photos printed on plain paper are generally of acceptable quality.

- Photocopy machines and scanners open opportunities for better displays and making multiple copies of children’s books or project dictations. Have a 6-foot-long class mural or a multi-dimensional sculpture that you want to include in a child’s portfolio? Take a picture of it, resize it on the computer, and print.

**Photography tips**

Remember the camera sees everything, not just the serious face of concentration but also the cluttered work surface, spilled paint, and the gloss of a nose that needs wiping.

Check the background through the camera and reposition yourself to get the cleanest shot. Avoid shooting against a window that can produce a background glare and children too shadowed to see clearly. You don’t want to arrange and pose, but you do want to avoid capturing anything that distracts from the child at work.

Closely focus on small groups of individual chil-
Children to capture expressions and project details.
Always try to make your photos add to the story: This child is exploring, discovering, and learning.
Review the photos right away, reflect on how the picture adds information about the children and their activities, and annotate as appropriate. Facing a disorganized digital file just before parent conferences makes the whole endeavor worthless.

Assessment requires time and effort
No documentation is worth the effort without serious reflection. It demands time, effort, and commitment. But when used for both planning and assessment, documentation offers a timeline for evaluating skills, framing experiences, and making teaching more effective. With a portfolio you have the tools to really think about children and how they grow and develop—individually and in a group.

You also have hands-on evidence of that development to share with parents, program administrators, and even the teachers the child will encounter in the future.

Professional portfolios for teachers
Just as a portfolio can document a child’s developmental achievements, it can be an equally powerful tool in recording and demonstrating your professional success. Far beyond a paper resume, a portfolio can wrap your qualifications and job experiences into a tidy package of exceptional value when it’s time to seek new employment or a promotion.

Build your professional portfolio with these documents:
- A single-page resume with your current job description
- A copy of your unofficial school transcript
- Documentation of in-service training
- Documentation of professional activities including organization membership
- Letters of recommendation
- Copies of formal job evaluations
- Work samples that evidence your skills in the classroom
  > A statement of your professional philosophy
  > A list of resources you use for instructional support
  > Sample lesson plans
  > Samples of children’s work
  > Sample video clips of your interactions with children saved electronically
  > Samples of your written reflections on activities, children, and planning
  > Self-evaluation reflections
  Review the contents of your portfolio annually and make updates as appropriate.

Resources