

Learning Stories

Judi Pack

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When I first read about New Zealand's Learning Stories approach, I was most impressed with its potential for connecting with families by sharing with them the awesomeness of their children while making visible the power of play.

The Learning Stories Assessment approach is a form of observation and documentation that is written in a narrative story format. The teacher watches and listens as children explore through play. She may take a photo or two, jot down some notes, and create a story about what she has seen to share with children and their families.

A story is powerful and meaningful to families and can often communicate more than a number, a score, or

a checklist of skills. Because the story is written *to* the children, it's both easy for teachers to write and easy for families to understand. Teachers become observers and story writers while reflecting on children's actions and words. The story is always a positive one about children's strengths, good ideas, and dispositions for learning.

I like to think of it as observing small moments that provide big opportunities.

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Creating a learning story

- **Write the story.** Describe what the child did and said, then provide your perspective on it. Add a title.
- **Read the story to the child.** Listen for her comments and feedback. You can also read the story to the entire group of children as long as the child in the story agrees to share it. Sharing a story can sometimes spark ideas for other children.
- **Plan.** Describe what you will do to enhance or extend the play. This is an opportunity to reflect on the child's play while planning for a group of children or one child. Will

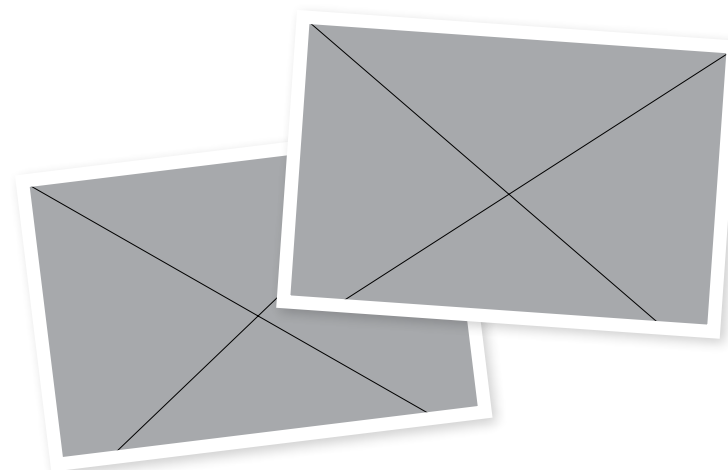
you add more or different materials? Provide books for research or books for story reading?

- **Connect to families.** Provide a copy of the story to the family, along with a note asking for their feedback. The note might say, “This is your child's story. I would appreciate any feedback or comments you wish to share.”

You can share more information about what the child has learned or is learning and attach that to the story when you place it in the child's portfolio.

What to look for when documenting a learning story

- **Child-initiated play.** The play comes from the child's ideas, interest, or discoveries.
- **Engagement.** The child is deeply engaged and sustains the play or inquiry for some time.
- **Intentionality.** The child has a plan or goal in mind.
- **Relationships.** The child is engaged with others or with materials in a way that is interesting to the teacher.
- **Learning disposition.** The child's way of learning or approach to figuring things out is revealed.



Benefits for children

- By listening to, observing, and recording children's explorations, you send them a clear message that you value their ideas and thinking.
- The child has an opportunity to reflect on his own thinking and learning.
- The group listens to and participates in each other's stories and ideas.

Benefits for teachers

- Teachers learn more about their group of children, child development in general, and how children learn.
- The stories provide insight into the best way to plan for a more meaningful curriculum.
- The stories become part of the child's portfolio and capture moments in the child's daily life that will create a comprehensive profile of a particular child.

Benefits for the entire school community

- Use learning stories as discussion prompts at staff meetings and for staff collaboration.
- Create books, displays, or slides for families, children, and teachers.
- Use stories to broadcast the strengths and capabilities of children to neighbors, families, and others in the wider community.

Benefits for families and the teacher/family relationship

The stories

- Illustrate how much the teachers value the children
- Provide information about children's strengths in a friendly, authentic format that informs how children learn through play
- Spotlight how children are natural learners, eager investigators, and problems solvers
- Open a door for continuing conversations with parents

- Show parents that teachers value their input
- Provide parents with insight about how teachers plan for their children's learning
- Show parents that teachers are thoughtful and continuous learners
- Provide a vehicle to help families and children to share and talk about children's school experiences
- Show children as powerful and capable

What teachers need to do

For teachers to embrace learning stories, they

- Are curious about how children learn and think
- Regard children's ideas as worthwhile and interesting
- Believe in the importance of connecting with parents in meaningful ways
- Are self-reflective and willing to use the stories as a catalyst for further understanding, growth, and action

Final thoughts

Learning stories can respectfully connect teachers with families and build strong relationships. When they write stories, teachers become better observers of children and develop their storytelling voice to joyfully share with the entire community. **TYC**

Supporting dual language learners

Children who are just beginning to learn the language spoken in the classroom may feel isolated and uncomfortable. Telling their stories to a caring and responsive adult can be so empowering for them. How can you capture a child's story when you speak a different language? Try inviting the child—and the other children in the class—to tell their stories on video. Then ask the family or volunteers to help translate.

Involve bilingual volunteers in writing the children's stories to support children's home languages. Be sure to share this article with the volunteers so they can understand the significance of this valuable interaction.

An Example of a Simple Learning Story

The Story: "Children Have Short Attention Spans—Don't They?"

To Agnes—

It was interesting to watch you scoop up and experiment with the sand. You were learning about its qualities and concentrated for a long time to do what you wanted to do. It looked frustrating because there was so little sand, but that did not stop you. Your work was slow and steady. Sometimes other children got in your way or interrupted, but you just kept on going! It was so much fun to watch you at work.

I think you were deciding a lot of things, including which tools to use and how you should use them. You were thinking about what you should use to make the sand scooping work best. You used a small scoop and then a detergent top. You were learning about learning!

To be a good learner, you have to stick with things and spend time on them. You did that!

What Next?

Tomorrow, I will add more sand to the pool so that the sand scooping will not be so frustrating and the results will be more satisfying. I will also add more scoops and tools and, perhaps, place a bucket of water nearby to invite further exploration. I'm going to look for a book about sandcastles and playing at the beach. This might interest Agnes and other children since it is almost summertime and some families may be heading to the beach.



Attach a sheet that parents can return to you

Hello! I have enclosed Agnes's latest learning story. What do you think?

What we learned

As Agnes played with the sand, she learned about the qualities and quirks of sand—how it flows, sticks, and feels on the skin. This is real science at work! She developed a variety of strategies in deciding which tools to use and mathematical thinking in choosing the container size, comparing containers and estimating which would work best. She used her motor skills, especially eye-hand coordination, which will help her as she begins writing. Most important, Agnes went about her task with

confidence, curiosity, and persistence. All of these are qualities that are needed for deep learning.

Judi Pack works as an independent consultant. She encourages early childhood professionals to listen carefully to children in order to build on their ideas and interests and focus on the joy of being together, discovering, and learning.