Supports for Summarizing

According to early childhood expert Kristie Pretti Frontczak, when we summarize information, we compile, recap, or describe “in a nutshell” information needed to make important decisions. Therefore, we can define the step of summarizing as the process of compiling relevant information by creating written reports, adding and totaling numbers, and by generating illustrations (e.g., graphs). Following are supports that help you learn more about summarizing as it relates to the formative assessment cycle.

Checklist For Summarizing:
1. Have we used multiple techniques or strategies to summarize?
2. When possible, have we combined techniques (e.g., visuals with narratives) to convey the greatest meaning possible?
3. Have we established a baseline and/or a rich description for comparisons over time?
4. Have we used objective language and avoided jargon?
5. Have we maintained confidentiality?
6. Have we adhered to privacy policies?
7. Have we summarized the child’s strengths, gifts, and contributions?
8. Have others indicated that our summaries make sense and represent their perspectives?
9. Have we avoided the trap of letting the form dictate the information we summarize?
10. Have we summarized in such a way as to guide instructional decision-making?

There are at least three broad techniques for summarizing:
1. Narrative summaries allow us to use words to compile, recap, or describe “in a nutshell” the information collected and documented. Guidelines for generating narrative summaries:
   • Incorporate multiple perspectives and examples while avoiding labels or judgments.
   • Represent a child’s performance across time, settings, and materials, and provide real examples from across the child’s daily routine.
   • Avoid using labels, even those that seem positive (e.g., kind, happy, cute, sweet, agreeable), and/or those that many imply a judgment (e.g., is overly active, doesn’t play much with others, appears tired).
   • Write in plain English and avoid jargon or technical terms. Even the most commonplace term can be jargony for someone who is outside the field of early education and/or who may speak a language other than English. Even words like assessment hold confusion within the field, and paired with terms or phrases such as symbolic play, with adaptations, developmental readiness, unintelligible or pincer grasp, can lead to more confusion than understanding.
   • No matter the decision we need to make, we must always equally consider a child’s strengths and provide any summaries from such a perspective. In other words, we can and should share strengths before concerns, and to the extent
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possible, start AND end on a positive. We do this not just because it is kind or sensitive to the family (although it is), but also because it will help us to consider strategies to help children (and families) achieve optimal functional, developmental, and academic outcomes.

• Include objective statements and avoid subjective statements. Objective statements are those which state facts, do not include opinions, should have limited bias, and often represent multiple perspectives. Subjective statements are those that are grounded in a person’s opinion and are subject to bias.

2. Numerical summaries allow us to take large amounts of information and condense it into something more manageable. Examples of numerical summaries:
   • Means
   • Percentages
   • Standard scores
   • Total amount of time
   • Total number of occurrences
   • Total length of time

3. Visual Summaries allow us to illustrate strengths, emerging skills, and progress towards prioritized outcome. In addition, visual summaries can help identify even small increments of change. Visual summaries help a) identify trends or patterns in children’s performance; b) quickly determine the effects of instruction or intervention; and c) communicate with caregivers regarding children’s progress over time. Examples include graphs, charts, diagrams, pictures, videos, bulletin boards, documentation panels, portfolios, slideshows, movies, and even maps.

General guidelines for summarizing:

• We need to carefully consider when to use each technique so that summaries are trustworthy, accurately illustrate a child’s abilities and/or a family’s priorities and concerns, and provide a comprehensive picture to inform decision-making.

• Regardless of technique(s) used, the intent of summarizing is to help educators in making sound decisions. The importance of engaging in summarizing information before moving to analysis and interpretation for decision-making is to place what we have gathered and documented into context. That is, summarizing information helps us to take stock of all of the information we have and to present it in a format that will be useful for analyzing and sharing, and ultimately making decisions.