

# Using a Data Narrative to Tell a Story

Head Start Program Performance Standard 1302.102 (c) Using data for continuous improvement. (1) A program must implement a process for using data to identify program strengths and needs, develop and implement plans that address program needs, and continually evaluate compliance with program performance standards and progress towards achieving program goals described in paragraph (a) of this section.

The purpose of this tip sheet is to demonstrate how developing a narrative about the data you collect on the children and families you work with can help you tell the full story about your program data.

## What is a data narrative?

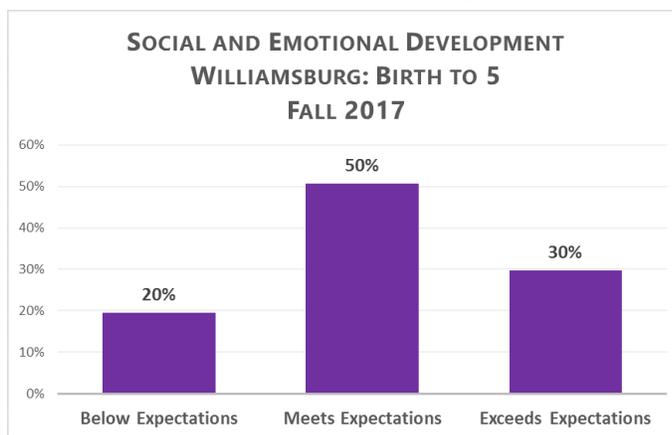
A data narrative is essentially a written summary of a set of data that draws conclusions and makes comparisons to explain the meaning of the data in detail. A well-designed data narrative can help others see important trends, comparisons, and differences in your data as well as the relevance and importance of the data to your topic.

## Why is it important for you to provide a narrative?

Using data to tell your story can be tricky. Even when we have current and informative data to share, these data can't always speak for themselves. It is helpful to provide a narrative that not only describes the data, but provides clear evidence for your interpretation of the data. To illustrate this concept, let's look at the following display of data from a fictional program, Williamsburg Head Start. Williamsburg's Birth to Five Fall 2017 data on social and emotional development is included in Figure 1.

- The title of this data chart tells us that this is social and emotional development data from Williamsburg Head Start's Birth to Five program for Fall 2017.
- From the figure, we can see that 20% of the children are performing below expectations, 50% of the children are meeting expectations, and 30% are exceeding expectations.

Figure 1. Social & Emotional Development Birth to Five



### Here are some other things that might be important to share about these data:

- How many of the children are in each age category? The age of the children in the program and the number of children in each category can skew the data. For example, data from an Early Head Start program in which 40% of the children are less than six months old may look different than data from a Head Start program in which 80% of the children are four years old with no previous Head Start experience.
- How many of the children are returning and how many of the children are new to Head Start or Early Head Start? Length of time in the program may affect the data.

## Sample narrative

Here is a sample narrative that provides additional information about the same data display (Figure 1) from Williamsburg’s Birth to Five program. As you can see, using the narrative tells more of the story.

Figure 1 shows social and emotional development data for the 145 children, birth to five, in the Williamsburg program who were enrolled as of September 15, 2017. Data on children’s development were collected using ongoing child assessment tools during the first two weeks of the beginning of the program year. Of the 145 children, 36 (25%) were less than 36 months old, 52 (36%) were three years old, and 57 children (39%) were four years old. Thirty-seven percent of the children were new to the program and 63% of the children had been enrolled in the program for at least one year.

Figure 1. Social & Emotional Development Birth to Five

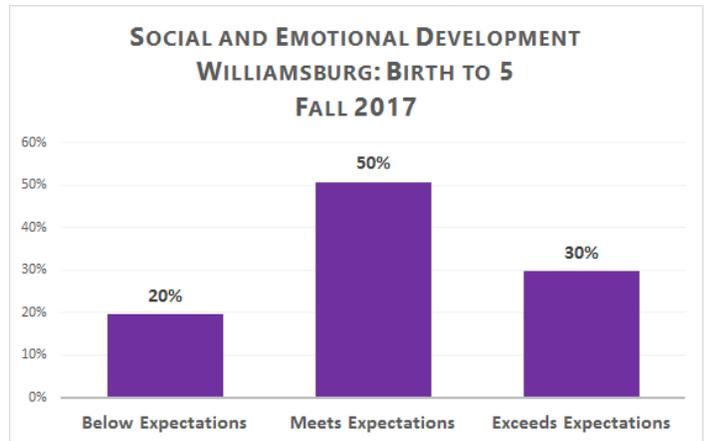
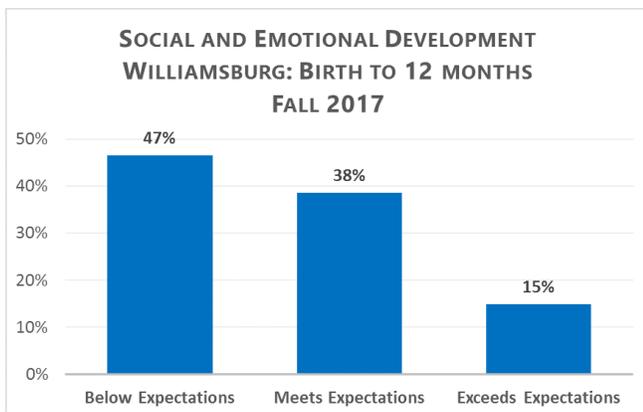


Figure 2. Social & Emotional Development Birth to 12 Months



Here’s another example of how a data narrative can help tell your story.

Figure 2 shows data for the children ages birth to 12 months in the Williamsburg program. Without a narrative, your audience might be very alarmed about the high percentage of children who are performing below expectations. But, if your narrative explains that there are only six children within this group and two of those children have disabilities that influence their ability to form relationships with others, then your data have more meaning.

## Conclusion

A data narrative for the figures in this tip sheet was vital to clearly and accurately present the data. It might be useful to ask yourself – what else does my audience need to know about the program and the children and families we serve to fully understand these data? The answer to that question can help you write a useful data narrative for your audience.

## Resources to support your work

For more information in using and sharing data, see

- Measuring What Matters: Using Data to Support Family Progress Overview at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/docs/measuring-what-matters.pdf>
- Data in Head Start and Early Head Start: Digging into Data at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/program-planning/article/data-head-start-early-head-start-digging-data>
- Additional examples of data stories can be found on <http://ridatahub.org/datastories/>



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