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assessment report

# Assessing Young Children

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## Introduction

Today's educational climate of standards and accountability extends even to preschool programs (Bowman, Donovan, and Burns, 2001). The *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB) mandates assessment and accountability at all levels of public school, even in early childhood—defined as birth through age 8 (NAEYC, 1987). Additionally, the current preschool initiative Good Start, Grow Smart requires a demonstration of positive child outcomes and ongoing assessment efforts. The initiative dramatically affects accountability measures for Head Start (Horn, 2003).

In light of this background, it is critical to understand how both formal and informal assessments, when developmentally appropriate in design and purpose, are beneficial for early childhood. This age period is often broken into three groups for discussion: infants/toddlers (ages 0 through 2), preschoolers (ages 3 through 5), and primary children (kindergarten through grade 3). This report will focus on young children aged 3 through 8 years. It will examine the perspectives of various national organizations on the essential role of assessment and accountability during early childhood, and will also describe an appropriate assessment system for this age group.

## The Challenge of Early Childhood Assessment

The assessment of young children is very different from the assessment of older children and adults in several ways. The greatest difference is in the way young children learn. They construct knowledge in experiential, interactive, concrete, and hands-on ways (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992, 1995) rather than through abstract reasoning and paper and pencil activities alone. To learn, young children must touch and manipulate objects, build and create in many media, listen and act out stories and everyday roles, talk and sing, and move and play in various ways and environments. Consequently, the expression of what young children know and can do would best be served in ways other than traditional paper and pencil assessments.



Assessment is also challenging during early childhood because a child's development is rapid, uneven, episodic, and highly influenced by the environment (Shepard, Kagan, and Wurtz, 1998). A developing child exhibits periods of both rapid growth and frequent rest. Children develop in four domains—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—and not at the same pace through each. No two children are the same; each child has a unique rate of development. In addition, no two children have the same family, cultural, and experiential backgrounds. Clearly, these variables mean that a “one-size-fits-all” assessment will not meet the needs of most young children (Shepard, et al.).

Another assessment challenge for young children is that it takes time to administer assessments properly. Assessments primarily should be administered in a one-on-one setting to each child by his or her teacher. In addition, a child's attention span is often very short and the assessment should therefore be administered in short segments over a period of a few days or even weeks. While early childhood educators demand developmentally appropriate assessments for children, they often complain about the time it takes to administer them and the resulting loss of instructional time in the classroom. However, when quality tests mirror quality instruction, assessment and teaching become almost seamless, complementing and informing one another (Neuman, Copple, and Bredekamp, 2000).

### **NAEYC Position Statement on Early Childhood Assessment (1987)**

In the position statement *Standardized Testing of Young Children 3 Through 8 Years of Age*, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1987) summarized a number of challenges faced when assessing young children.

First, the NAEYC stressed the importance of quality instruments and emphasized that not all assessments are detrimental to young children. According to NAEYC, quality assessments are those that meet the guidelines for reliability and validity as established by the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (American Educational Research Association, 1999), are appropriate for the child's age and stage of development, and rely heavily on demonstration or expression of skills and knowledge. These assessments also should be individually administered to elicit the most accurate and useful information for the teacher.

The NAEYC position statement also emphasizes that administrators play an important role in using the information generated by assessments. When interpreting assessment results, administrators must be aware and sensitive to each young child's unique rate of development. Decisions about a child's placement or special needs should never be based on a single test result. The

appropriate use of information from early childhood assessments is to guide instruction and to determine what the child is ready for next in terms of knowledge and skills. Administrators also use information from assessments and other sources to evaluate, strengthen, and monitor educational programs.

### **National Education Goals Panel on Early Childhood Assessment (1998)**

Advice published in *Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments* (Shepard, et al., 1998) by the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), a government-appointed committee and extension of the Goals 2000 education movement, still has meaning today. According to the NEGP guidelines, assessments should:

- bring about benefits for children;
- be tailored to a specific purpose;
- be reliable, valid, and fair;
- bring about and reflect policies that acknowledge that as the age of the child increases, reliability and validity of the assessment increases;
- be age-appropriate in both content and methodology;
- be linguistically appropriate because all assessments measure language; and
- value parents as an important source of assessment information.

In addition, the NEGP very clearly stated that assessments should be used for a specific purpose and that a single assessment more than likely could not serve multiple purposes. The purposes of assessments are to support learning, identify special needs, evaluate a program, monitor trends, and serve high stakes accountability requirements. The NEGP recommends that standardized assessments for high stakes purposes not be administered until grade 3 and preferably not until grade 4 (Shepard, et al., 1998).

### **IRA / NAEYC Position Statement on Reading and Writing (1998)**

In response to the nation's growing interest and commitment to literacy, the International Reading Association (IRA) and the NAEYC jointly published the position statement *Overview of Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* (1998). Because these two organizations have at times been at odds with each other over what are appropriate instructional techniques for early childhood, this document is an especially significant agreement between the two groups concerning how children learn to read and write. The position statement describes for the early childhood and reading communities that "developmentally appropriate" means setting



achievable yet challenging goals. Furthermore, it emphasizes that: (1) the foundation of reading consists of basic skills which can (and should) be taught and (2) quality ongoing diagnostic assessment is essential in knowing how to help young children become good readers.

### **National Research Council (1999)**

The National Research Council (NRC) is a national panel convened by the National Academy of Sciences to study the issue of literacy development. After an extensive and exhaustive review of literacy and reading research, the NRC published a sweeping report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Burns, Griffin, and Snow, 1999), which set forth guidelines and recommendations for literacy development and the role of assessment for young children. The report states that it is absolutely essential for teachers to know how to use “ongoing in-class assessments” and how to interpret “norm-referenced and individually referenced assessment outcomes, including both formal and informal in-class assessments and progress-monitoring measures used by specialists” (Burns, et al., p. 123).

According to the NRC report, high-quality assessments should be child-friendly, include developmentally appropriate activities, and mirror quality instruction. In addition, they should be individually and orally administered so as to provide immediate, diagnostic information to the teacher. The assessment program should be based on benchmarks or standards of achievement. Quality assessments benefit the classroom teacher in real ways by providing certainty of each child’s initial and continued literacy levels. Quality assessments provide detailed diagnostic information to guide planning for instruction and monitoring of individual student progress over time.

### **NAEYC / NAECS / SDE Position Statement on Early Childhood (2003)**

The most recently published position statement is *Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation* (National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2003), which draws on all the prior works discussed above. It emphasizes linking assessment information to the family. It also points out the importance of professional development for teachers and parents in understanding and using assessment for: “(1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning; (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children; and (3) helping programs improve their educational and developmental interventions” (p. 3). The statement recommends “[making] ethical, appropriate, valid, and reliable assessment a central part of all early childhood programs” (p. 1).

## **A Quality Early Childhood Assessment and Accountability System**

An assessment and accountability system for young children should incorporate the characteristics of quality discussed above. The following are examples of early childhood assessment tools, one or more of which could be included in a quality assessment system for young children. When used together in an assessment system, these tools will yield meaningful and useful information to teachers, parents, and administrators.

### **1. Observations and Checklists**

A well-defined checklist with observation training is critical and essential for an assessment system. Observations of child behaviors and skills provide the teacher with a powerful measure of a child's abilities. For example, a teacher observation of a child retelling what happened last night at home with a big smile and expressive language is a truer measure of oral language skills than asking the child to retell a story in an unfamiliar setting.

### **2. Anecdotal Records**

Anecdotal records are short, factual, narrative descriptions of child behaviors and skills over time. Anecdotal records should be as objective as possible and only a few sentences long. "Gina, age 4.10, chose the library center today. She pretended to read Peter Rabbit to two doll babies and Jessica. She turned each page and recited with expression the memorized words on each page. She showed the picture at each page turn."

### **3. Running Records**

Running records are similar to anecdotal records but are much longer. An observer objectively writes in a narrative format everything the child did and said for a specific time period such as thirty minutes. Running records are especially helpful in analyzing social skill development or behavior concerns. Running records also can be narrowly focused to a subject area such as a running record that documents the accuracy and miscue strategies of a child reading a specific passage.

### **4. Portfolios**

A portfolio is a flexible and adaptable collection over time of various concrete work samples showing many dimensions of the child's learning. This type of assessment tool is particularly ideal for use in the primary grades when children are developing knowledge and skills in several subject areas at different rates. This type of assessment also focuses on the child's strengths and demonstrations of knowledge and skills.

## **5. Home Inventories**

Parents may see behaviors and skills that children demonstrate in only the home setting. Home inventories collect valuable information through a survey or set of short, open-ended response items completed by the adult at the child's home.

## **6. Developmental Screenings**

Developmental screenings are a short (15–20 minutes) set of age- and content-appropriate performance items based on a developmental continuum and linked to ages typical for the behavior. This type of assessment is helpful in identifying major developmental delays that indicate the need for a more thorough diagnostic assessment. Screening assessments should not necessarily screen out a child as “not ready,” but rather serve as a guide for instruction that reveals the subject areas for which the child is ready to begin learning. This type of assessment can also provide guidance for the program needs.

## **7. Diagnostic Assessments**

A diagnostic assessment identifies a range of strengths and weaknesses in the child and suggests specific remedial actions. Classroom diagnostic assessments are not direct measures of academic outcome and should never be used for accountability purposes alone.

## **8. Standardized Assessments**

Standardized assessments are typically administered in groups and provide normative and scalable data that can be aggregated and reported to administrators and policymakers. Standardized assessments are direct measures of children's outcomes and are administered under very stringent protocols. Standardized assessments are also used to monitor trends and for program evaluation and accountability. Typically, standardized assessments are paper/pencil-based and designed to capture only the child's response without administrator bias. Quality standardized tests are developed in accordance with guidelines in *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, 1999).

For young children, standardized tests also should contain authentic content and mirror classroom instruction. They should incorporate an inviting use of color and graphics and include manipulatives when appropriate. Screening and diagnostic assessments may also be standardized in the way they are administered. Because standardized assessments are not as accurate, valid, and reliable for young children as they are for older children, they should not be used solely to make high stakes decisions until grade 3 and preferably not until grade 4 (Shepard et al., 1998).

## Pearson's Recommendations

Pearson recommends that the following guidelines are followed when testing children in preschool and the early grades:

- Administer tests in a one-on-one setting
- The child should know the test administrator (preferably the teacher)
- If it is not possible for the child to be tested by a someone familiar, the test administrator should use warm-up activities to build rapport with the child
- Keep each testing session short
- Reinforce the child throughout the testing session

## Conclusion

Quality formal and informal assessments are essential parts of a sound early childhood program and are mandated in federal programs such as Head Start and Reading First. Educators, administrators, and policy makers responsible for the education of young schoolchildren should not fear a carefully planned assessment program. Quality assessments have the following benefits:

- They give teachers valuable and individualized information about children's developing skills and knowledge
- They lead the teacher to select quality early childhood activities and instruction
- They provide information that helps administrators strengthen existing programs and hold them accountable
- Most of all, developmentally appropriate assessments benefit young children by helping teachers ensure that a young child's educational journey springs from a solid foundation of basic skills

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