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ABSTRACT

For several decades there has been a loud outcry from the early childhood education community that assessment, especially standardized assessment, is inappropriate during the early years. As we move through the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is a new public outcry for standards and accountability--even for preschool programs. Therefore, it is critical to understand that both formal and informal assessments, when developmentally appropriate in design and purpose, can be a good thing in the early years. This chapter examines ongoing perspectives from various national organizations on the essential role of assessment during the early years and defines an appropriate assessment system for this age group. (Contains 13 references.) (GCP)

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# *Assessment for Children Ages 3 to 8 Years*

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## Chapter 19

# Assessments for Children Ages 3 to 8 Years

### Age-Appropriate Systems

*Marcy Priess Guddemi*

For several decades there has been a loud outcry from the early childhood education community that assessment, especially standardized assessment, is inappropriate during the early years. Position statements on assessment state that standardized assessments are not recommended before grade three and would be best delayed until grade four (see, e.g., NAEYC, 1987; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1995; Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998).

Those who work directly with children also have strong concerns about assessment in the early years. Classroom teachers report that children at the end of kindergarten cry when they are unable to answer unfamiliar multiple-choice questions that require pencils and bubble sheets or advanced reading skills. Parents report that even children ages five to eight years develop stress-related symptoms such as stomachaches, headaches, and anxiety during these testing periods. Results of some of these assessments give little helpful information to classroom teachers or to parents. In fact the assessments force the curriculum to become more structured and workbook oriented. Parents and educators worry, and research confirms, that children who are labeled early retain that label throughout their entire school experience (NAEYC, 1987).

As we move through the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is a new public outcry for standards and accountability—even for preschool programs (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000). Therefore, it is critical to understand that both informal and formal assessments, when developmentally appropriate in design and purpose, are a *good thing* in the early years. This chapter examines ongoing perspectives from various national organizations on the essential role of assessment during the early years and defines an appropriate assessment system for this age group.

## Early Childhood Assessment

Assessment during early childhood<sup>1</sup> is different from assessment of older children and adults for several reasons. Most importantly, young children learn differently. Young children learn or construct knowledge in experiential, interactive, concrete, and hands-on ways (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992, 1995). They do not learn through paper-and-pencil activities alone nor have they developed abstract reasoning. Young children must touch and manipulate objects, build and create in many media, listen to and act out stories and everyday roles, talk and sing, and move and play in many ways and in many environments. Therefore, young children need to express learning in ways other than traditional paper-and-pencil assessments.

Assessment is also difficult during these early years because a child's development is rapid, uneven, episodic, and highly influenced by the environment (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998). Each child has his or her own rate of development. A child goes through rapid growth spurts and apparent resting periods of development during the early years. Children develop in four domains physical, cognitive, social, and emotional and not at the same speed or pace in each. No two children are the same. Likewise, no two children have the same familial, cultural, and experiential background. A one-size-fits-all assessment will not meet the needs of most children (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998).

Assessment is difficult during the early years because it takes time to do it properly. Early childhood assessments should be administered primarily one-on-one between a child and the child's teacher or parent (Meisels, 1989). The assessment should also be administered in short segments over a few days or even weeks because a young child's attention span is often very short. Although early childhood educators demand developmentally appropriate assessments for their children, they often complain about how much time it takes to administer the assessments and how much instructional time is lost in the classroom. When quality assessments mirror quality instruction, however, assessment and teaching become almost seamless, complementing and informing each other (Neuman, Copple, & Bredekamp, 2000).

### NAEYC Position Statement on Early Childhood Assessment

The 1987 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement on assessment expresses the

views of tens of thousands of early childhood professionals. The NAEYC led the movement to keep standardized assessments and many other types of assessments out of kindergarten and the primary grades across the country. Upon current review, the points in the statement are still valid. The NAEYC stresses the importance of quality instruments and that not all assessments are bad. Quality assessments meet the guidelines for reliability and validity as established by the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA, APA, & NCME, 1999). As previously discussed, quality assessments are appropriate for the child's age and stage of development. They rely heavily on demonstration or expression of skills and knowledge—not on paper-and-pencil performance. They should also be individually administered to gain the most accurate and useful information for the teacher.

The NAEYC statement also emphasizes that administrators have an important role to play in using the information generated by assessments. Administrators must be aware of and sensitive to an individual child's uneven rates of development when interpreting information from assessments. Decisions about a child's placement or special resources should never be based on a single test score. The appropriate use of early assessment information is to guide instruction and to determine what a child is ready for next in terms of knowledge and skills.

The NAEYC updated and further refined its position in several subsequent documents. The "Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8" (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1995) and *Reaching Potentials*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992, 1995) provide specific guidelines and recommendations on content and curriculum goals, standards, and systematic, ongoing assessment using various assessment tools.

### **National Education Goals Panel on Early Childhood Assessment**

The National Education Goals Panel, a government-appointed committee and extension of the Goals 2000 education movement, published national guidelines for early childhood assessment (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998). NEGP states that assessment 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 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 panel clearly states that assessments should be used for a specific purpose and that the same assessment more than likely cannot serve two purposes. The purposes of assessments are to support learning, to identify special needs, to evaluate a program, to monitor trends, or for high-stakes accountability. The panel recommends that assessment for accountability purposes not be administered until grade three or preferably grade four.

### **IRA/NAEYC Position Statement on Reading and Writing**

NAEYC and the International Reading Association (IRA) developed an important position statement in response to the nation's growing interest in and commitment to literacy. Because these two organizations have at times been at odds over what is appropriate for early childhood education, this document is especially powerful as an expression of their agreement on appropriate practices for learning to read and write. The document provides valuable information about how children develop literacy skills and clarifies for both the early childhood community and the reading community that *developmentally appropriate* means challenging yet achievable goals and that the foundation of reading consists of basic skills that can (and should) be taught. Furthermore, it emphasizes that quality, ongoing diagnostic assessment is essential in determining how to help young children become good readers. "Good assessment is essential to help teachers tailor appropriate instruction to young children and to know when and how much instruction on any particular skill or strategy might be needed" (IRA & NAEYC, 1998, p. 8).

### **National Research Council**

The National Research Council (NRC) is another group that was organized to study literacy but has also provided valuable insight to

appropriate assessment for young children. The council was convened by the National Academy of Sciences to study the issue of literacy development in this country. After their extensive and exhaustive review of literacy and reading research, NRC published a sweeping report, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1998), which set forth guidelines and recommendations not only for literacy development but also for assessment of young children. The document 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” (p. 330).

According to the NRC, quality assessment should be child-friendly and include developmentally appropriate activities. The highest quality assessments actually mirror quality instruction and are based on benchmarks and standards of achievement. In addition, they should be individually and orally administered so that they provide immediate diagnostic information to the teacher. Quality assessments actually benefit the classroom teacher by providing reliable information about each child’s initial and ongoing literacy level. Quality assessments provide detailed diagnostic information that will guide planning for instruction and monitoring of individual student progress over time.

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

Most organizations and educators agree that assessment for young children should involve several quality assessment tools. When used together, these tools create an assessment *system* to provide information to teachers, parents, and administrators. The following examples of quality early childhood assessment tools could be part of a quality assessment system for young children.

**Observations and checklists.** A well-defined checklist used by a teacher who has had observation training is critical for a quality assessment system. Observations of child behaviors and skills provide the teacher with a powerful measure of a child’s abilities. For example, a child telling a teacher, during an informal conversation, what happened the night before at home, with eyes wide open, a big smile, and rich expressive language provides a truer and deeper measure of oral language skills than does placing the child in a contrived situation to retell a story that may or may not make sense to the child or contain

familiar items and settings.

**Anecdotal records.** Collecting short, factual, narrative descriptions of child behaviors and skills over time is another powerful assessment tool. This type of assessment records what the child can do. Anecdotal records should be as objective as possible and only a few sentences long, for example, “Gina chose the library center today. She pretended to read *Peter Rabbit* to two dolls and Jessica. She turned each page and recited with expression the memorized words on each page. She showed the picture at each page turn.”

**Running records.** This type of assessment is similar to an anecdotal record but much longer. An observer objectively writes in narrative format everything the child does and says for a specific time period (e.g., 30 minutes). Running records are especially helpful in analyzing social skill development or behavioral concerns. Running records can also be narrowly focused, such as a reading running record to determine and document accuracy and miscue strategies of a child reading a specific passage.

**Portfolios.** A flexible and adaptable collection over time of various concrete work samples showing many dimensions of the child’s learning comprises a portfolio. This type of assessment tool is particularly suited for use in the primary grades, when children are developing knowledge and skills in several subject areas and at different rates. This type of assessment also focuses on the child’s strengths—what he or she can do.

**Home inventories.** Valuable information can be collected from surveys or a set of short, open-ended response items completed by the adult at the child’s home.

**Developmental screenings.** A screening is a short set of age- and content-appropriate performance items (15–20 minute administration) that are based on a developmental continuum and linked to typical ages of development. This type of assessment is helpful in identifying major developmental delays. Screenings should not screen out children as “not ready,” but rather should be a guide for instruction that reflects where the child *is* ready to begin learning.

**Diagnostic assessments.** The purpose of a diagnostic assessment is to

identify a wide range of particular strengths and weaknesses and to suggest specific remediations. At one time a diagnostic assessment was defined as an assessment to be given after a developmental screening identified a special need. A broader definition now includes a type of informal assessment used by classroom teachers to guide and inform instruction. Diagnostic assessments are considered low stakes and should never be used for accountability.

**Standardized assessments.** Standardized assessments provide normative and scalable data that can be aggregated and reported to administrators and policymakers. These are direct measures of children's performance, administered under stringent protocols. Typically, standardized assessments are paper-and-pencil in orientation and designed to capture the child's response without administrator subjectivity. Quality standardized tests follow the guidelines of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* (AERA et al., 1999). For young children, they should also be authentic in content and should mirror classroom instruction. They should be inviting in their use of color and graphics and should also use manipulatives. Screenings and diagnostic assessments may also be standardized in the way the assessment is given. Standardized assessments are used to monitor trends and for program evaluation, and they are usually considered high stakes. Because the younger the child, the less accurate, valid, and reliable the measure, formal standardized assessments should not be used as the sole source of information on which to make high-stakes decisions before grade three, and preferably not until grade four.

### Conclusion

Educators of young children should not fear a carefully chosen, quality assessment system. These informal and formal assessments are essential to a sound early childhood program. Quality assessments give teachers valuable information about the child's developing skills and knowledge. They lead teachers to select quality early childhood activities and instruction. Finally, quality assessments help teachers help the children so that no child will be left behind.

### Note

1. Early childhood is actually defined as birth through age eight (NAEYC, 1987). This age range is often broken into three groups for discussion: infants and toddlers

(birth through age two), preschoolers (ages three through five), and primary children (ages six through eight). This chapter will not address any of the special needs of infants and toddlers.

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