



TREND BRIEFS

Trend Briefs are communications from the NAEYC Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation intended to share data on programs seeking accreditation and to connect the findings to early childhood research trends.

Assessment of Child Progress

Accreditation of Programs for Young Children

Standard 4

The appropriate utilization of assessments has long been at the heart of effective early childhood education programs. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) position statement on curriculum, instruction, and assessment underscores the need for a systemic, integrated approach for linking assessments with curriculum and instruction.¹ This approach was endorsed and furthered by the National Academies of Science panel on early childhood assessment,² which stated explicitly "... that a primary purpose of assessing children or classrooms is to improve the quality of early childhood care and education by identifying where more support, professional development, or funding is needed and by providing classroom personnel

tools to track children's growth and adjust instruction (p. 10)." As such, aligning assessments with curriculum and instruction ensures that the intended outcomes are addressed and monitored, while misaligned systems cannot ensure that intentions are being met.³

Framing an Assessment System for Young Children

High-quality early childhood education is supported by assessments aligned with instructional goals and approaches.⁴ Assessment, however, does not refer simply to the tool being utilized; it refers to an interconnected system of decisions and activities. Assessment includes consideration of the assessment tools being used, and how the information gained from those tools can be appropriately used. For example, some assessments are appropriately used for screening for devel-

opmental delays, and provide data that indicate whether additional diagnostic assessments should be given. Other assessments chart children's progress, either against expected milestones or relative to instructional and curricular goals. Data from these assessments can be appropriately used to describe children's progress. Understanding the match between an assessment's intended use and how the results are used allows programs to intentionally design systems that align with their goals. Failure to do so creates the risk for misalignment, with potentially unintended consequences.⁵

The NAEYC guidelines for Standard 4, assessment of child progress, articulate this system through a series of five topic areas. The first, Topic A, calls for programs to develop and articulate a plan for the use of assessments and their results. The second (Topic B) calls for programs to use appropriate

About the Reliability and Validity Study (ReVal-1)

NAEYC Accreditation requires programs to demonstrate their ongoing capacity to meet each of the 10 NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards. Each program standard is defined by a set of accreditation criteria which are organized into topic areas. There are 417 criteria across the 10 standards. The primary goals of ReVal-1 were to describe the standards and criteria (e.g., pass rates, means, variance) across and within the measurement tools; to replicate the initial field study findings of internal consistency within the 10 program standards; and to relate standards and cri-

teria to accreditation outcomes (i.e., whether the programs became accredited or not). The ReVal-1 sample included approximately 130 programs receiving accreditation site visits between September 2009 and July 2010. During these visits, experienced assessors captured data on all 417 of NAEYC's criteria. Programs in the ReVal-1 study were scored, like other programs, on only a subset of the criteria for purposes of their accreditation decision. In this sample, 114 programs were ultimately accredited and 13 were not accredited (8 were deferred, 5 were denied).

assessments. This includes not only aligning assessments with their intended use, but also giving consideration to how well the assessment is designed (that is, the assessment’s psychometric properties).⁶ The next two topics (C and D) speak specifically to how the data from assessments are to be appropriately used—to identify children’s needs and describe their progress, and to inform instruction, curriculum, and program design. Finally, the NAEYC standards call for programs to engage families in the assessment process (Topic E), including informing families of children’s progress, responding to families’ assessment-related desires for their child, and ensuring that assessments are appropriate for all children from diverse backgrounds. Collectively, these topics form a rough progression, from assessment system planning (topics A and B) through increasingly complex aspects of utilization (topics C, D, and E). As noted above, the best quality programs will meet expectations across this progression, while some programs may meet the intentionality-based elements of the standard (topics A and B), but fall short of standards for utilization. Understanding how early childhood programs meet this range of criteria not only informs NAEYC’s accreditation system, but may also provide some insights into the current state of the field.

Findings

To examine trends in programs’ child assessment policies and practices, we utilized data from the Reliability and Validity Study (see “About the Reliability and Validity Study [ReVal-1]”) on Standard 4’s 27 assessment-related criteria. We first calculated the pass rate for each criterion across the 127 programs assessed. Criterion pass rates in Standard 4 ranged from a low of 63.0% (Criterion 4.C.01) to a high of 100% (Criterion 4.B.06), with a median pass rate of 92.9%. This median pass rate for Standard 4 is high compared to most of the 10 standards; only Standard 1 is higher.

When criterion pass rates are grouped according to the five topic areas within Standard 4, an interesting trend appears (see Figure 1).

Median pass rates calculated within each topic area are progressively lower from Topic A (median 97%) through Topic E (median 90%). The topics within the assessment standard reflect a progression in the development and application of a high-quality assessment approach. Programs start by developing and articulating an assessment plan (Topic A). This plan provides the basis for programs to utilize appropriate assessment methods (Topic B), and using these assessments in an appropriate way—to identify chil-

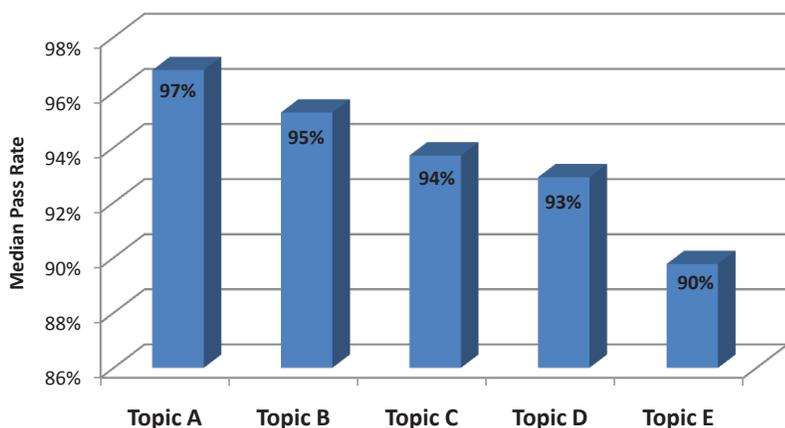
dren’s abilities (Topic C) and to use the results to inform curriculum, instruction, and program development (Topic D). The final topic in the progression combines the best practices in assessment articulated by the National Academies report on assessment with NAEYC’s commitment to engaging families (Topic E). The progressively lower pass rates across these topic areas map the apparent complexity and difficulty in meeting the elements of the standard.

The previous data describe the experience of all programs entering the accreditation process. We also compared criterion pass rates for the 114 programs in the sample that became accredited by NAEYC to the 13 programs that were not accredited. For example, criterion 4.E.06 was met in 90% of the programs that became accredited, but it was met in only 54% of the programs that were deferred or denied accreditation, showing a difference in pass rate of approximately 36 percentage points. Across all criteria in Standard 4, accredited programs showed a median criterion pass rate of 94.7%, while deferred and denied programs had a median pass rate of 76.9%.

The criterion pass rate medians for accredited versus not accredited programs within each of the five topic areas in Standard 4 are shown in Figure 2.

The difference in pass rates (in absolute percentage points) varied across topics, from a low of 7.9 points (Topic B) to a high of 31.4 points (Topic E). While accredited programs showed some decline in pass rates from Topic A through Topic E, the trend was very pronounced among the defer/deny programs. This comparison provides some insight into how programs progress in addressing child assessment. Specifically, among programs not accredited, the pass rates for topic areas A and B (developing an assessment plan and using appropriate methods) is relatively high, but that pass rate drops dramatically for the program’s use of the assessment data, either to describe children’s progress or inform instruction, curriculum, and program design (topics C and D). The pass rate drops further for Topic E, which looks at how these programs communicate with and engage families in their child’s assessment. While programs not accredited are reasonably successful at the

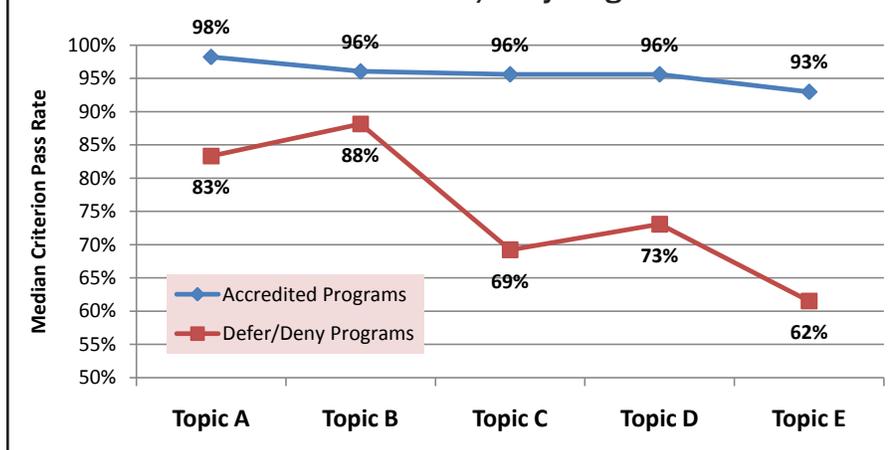
Figure 1: Standard 4 Median Criterion Pass Rates by Topic Area



Standard 4 Topics:

- Topic A: *Creating an Assessment Plan*
- Topic B: *Using Appropriate Assessment Methods*
- Topic C: *Identifying Children’s Interests and Needs and Describing Children’s Progress*
- Topic D: *Adapting Curriculum, Individualizing Teaching, and Informing Program Development*
- Topic E: *Communicating with Families and Involving Families in the Assessment Process*

Figure 2: Standard 4 Median Criterion Pass Rates by Topic Area for Accredited vs. Defer/Deny Programs



foundational elements of assessment (developing a plan and using appropriate methods), the utilization of the resulting assessment data appears to be more challenging. In contrast, only a slight negative progression across these topics is seen among accredited programs.

We also examined pass rate differences in each of the 27 specific criteria in Standard 4. From this set, seven individual criteria showed the greatest differences in how often they were met in accredited programs when compared to not-accredited programs. Pass rate differences for these seven criteria range from 27.3% to 40% and are shown in Table 1.

There are several findings of note in the pass rate differences across criteria. First, although accredited programs and those not accredited have different overall pass rates for topics A and B, no criteria from these topic areas differentiate between the two groups of programs. This suggests a need to focus holistically on improvement of application of criteria under that topic, rather than a focus on one or two criteria that appear to require additional supports. Indeed, the greatest pass rate differences are concentrated in topic area E, with more than half of the seven biggest pass rate differences coming from criteria in this topic area. Further, five of these seven criteria speak to issues of communication—among teachers (4.E.03), between teachers and family (4.E.03, 4.E.06, 4.E.04, 4.E.05) and teachers and children (4.D.07), with one additional criterion (4.C.03) touching on interpretation of assessment data. These find-

ings suggest a potential need for ongoing support to teachers concerning how to talk about assessment and how to develop strategies to facilitate those interactions. The final criterion with a large pass rate difference (4.D.06) is specific to programs serving infants. This criterion includes one of the elements noted above—interpretation of assessment data—but failure on this criterion can also result from limited or no assessment of infants at all. This latter possibility reflects the still reluctant acceptance of assessment for the very young.

These program-level data on the use of assessment reflect the larger fields' evolving capability to utilize assessment systematically. This evolution is also reflected in the way NAEYC has evaluated programs' approaches to

assessment within our own standards. The “developmental progression” of systems for assessment of child progress can be viewed from the perspective of how NAEYC's criteria have developed and are still developing. Prior to reinvention (see the 1998 edition of NAEYC Criteria), child assessment was referenced primarily in a single criterion (J-3), with secondary references in three other criteria (B-3, C-6, C-9). The current set of Standards and Criteria includes 27 criteria in Standard 4 as well as numerous cross-references to child assessment among criteria in other standards (see for example criteria 7.B.03 and 2.A.06).

Our work continues to evolve in more discrete ways as well. Among the current criteria in Standard 4 are three “Emerging Practice” criteria⁷—that is, criteria “that are important to program quality but are not yet widely practiced.”⁸ All three were among the criteria with the lowest overall pass rates in Standard 4 (see Table 2). None of the three showed notable pass rate differences between accredited programs and deferred/denied programs. These three criteria point to additional specific areas of child assessment in need of further development. Meeting these three criteria may be challenging to programs, each for different reasons.

For many years NAEYC has emphasized the need to use authentic, classroom-based assessments as the best source of information to inform program practices. Criterion 4.C.01 recognizes that formally developed

Table 1: Standard 4 Criteria with the Highest Pass Rate Differences, Accredited vs. Defer/Deny Programs

Criterion	Accredited Program Pass Rate	Defer+Deny Program Pass Rate	Acc/DD Pass Rate Difference	Criterion Language (abridged as shown)
4.E.03	93.9%	53.8%	40.0%	Teachers, families, and relevant specialists have regular opportunities to participate in two-way communication conferences to discuss each child's progress, accomplishments, difficulties in the classroom and at home, as well as to plan learning activities.
4.D.06	87.5%	50.0%	37.5%	<i>(Infant only)</i> Teachers observe infants to assess development and use these observations to modify the curriculum, interactions, and care.
4.E.06	89.5%	53.8%	35.6%	The program staff provide families with information about the choice, use, scoring, and interpretation of screening and assessment methods that includes ... the purpose and use ... the interpretations of the results... [how] teaching staff ... have been trained ... and information about the specific instruments used.
4.E.04	78.9%	46.2%	32.8%	Staff work to achieve consensus with families about assessment methods that will best meet the child's needs.
4.E.05	93.0%	61.5%	31.4%	Communication with families about their child's assessments is sensitive to family values, culture, identity, and home language.
4.C.03	98.2%	69.2%	29.0%	Teachers refer to curriculum goals and developmental expectations when interpreting assessment data.
4.D.07	96.5%	69.2%	27.3%	Teachers talk and interact with individual children and encourage their use of language to inform assessment of children's strengths, interests, and needs.

Table 2: Pass Rates for Emerging Practice Criteria in Standard 4 (N=127 programs)

Criterion	Criterion language (abridged)	Pass Rate
4.C.01	All children receive developmental screening ... [that is timely; reliable and valid; developmentally normed; comprehensive; periodically evaluated; and used to make appropriate referrals (6 indicators)].	63.0%
4.D.02	Teaching teams meet at least weekly to interpret and use assessment results to align curriculum and teaching practices to the interests and needs of the children.	74.8%
4.E.07	The program staff provide families with a full explanation of confidentiality by...[4 indicators].	84.1%

and normed testing practices have their place in child assessment for purposes of developmental screening and referral. While overall about 97% of programs have an assessment plan, it would appear that developmental screening may not be included in those plans. This speaks to the emphasis on appropriate uses of assessment; programs might focus their plans on some uses, notably charting children’s progress and informing instruction, but might not incorporate assessments used for screening.

Criterion 4.D.02 challenges programs to concretely commit staff time each week to the review and interpretation of child assessments. Any teaching staff time not spent on direct service to children is added expense, as other staff must cover classrooms in their place. However, nearly three-quarters of programs meet this criterion, suggesting that it can be achieved. In addition, while face-to-face meetings among staff may be most desirable, it might be necessary for programs to develop alternative strategies that enable the sharing and use of assessment information.

With the increasing emphasis on assessment, and then purposeful use of the resulting data (including communication with colleagues and families), legitimate concerns about confidentiality and security of information may be raised. In that context, criterion 4.E.07 calls for administrators to develop additional policies, forms, and procedures explaining confidentiality as it relates to the assessment process. Developing, testing, and disseminating new policies is a chore that competes for administrators’ time when each day may bring more immediate, pressing concerns. This criterion asks that administrators share “regulations governing access to files and familial rights.”

This is an area of program policy development that can be supported by training and resource development.

Conclusion

The overall pass rate (among programs accredited and those not accredited) was over 90% for criteria aligned with NAEYC standards for the use of child assessment. This is notable because of the ongoing debate about the use of assessment for young children, and infants and toddlers in particular. While the set of programs that seek NAEYC accreditation is not a random selection of all programs nationally, this is an encouraging trend toward the adoption of assessment in a systematic, intentional way. The downward progression in pass rates as topic areas become more focused on assessment utilization, while modest among accredited programs, is severe among programs not accredited. In this sense, these programs reflect the general trend in the field toward increasing recognition of intentional and appropriate assessment in programs for young children. We still face ongoing challenges in how best to use these assessments to inform instruction and programs. These findings present overall a “good news” account of how programs in the accreditation process have mastered the basics of child assessment: they have well-articulated assessment plans (Topic A), and they choose and use developmentally and culturally appropriate assessment methods (Topic B). However, in the trend downward across topics, the findings also suggest a “developmental progression” in programs’ understanding and mastery of a fully implemented system for assessment of child progress. Programs that are less strong overall (that is, those with Defer/Deny decisions) are perhaps

still working on routinely interpreting and integrating assessment information in light of curriculum goals (Topic C, for example, 4.C.03). Getting teaching teams to adopt flexible, integrated, individualized assessment practices (Topic D, for example, 4.D.06) may depend upon their thorough training and increased experience with child assessment. Mastering the family connection—communicating with families and involving them in the child assessment process (Topic E, for example, 4.E.03)—depends upon program administrators’ development of policies and procedures as the structure within which this connection can occur.

1. NAEYC & NAECS/SDE (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education). 2003. *Joint Position Statement on Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. www.naeyc.org/about/positions/cape.asp.

2. Snow, C., & S. Van Hemel. 2008. *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What and How?* Report of the Committee on Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young Children. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

3. Martone, A., & S.G. Sireci. 2009. “Evaluating Alignment between Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction.” *Review of Educational Research* 79 (4): 1332–1361.

4. NAEYC & NAECS/SDE (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education). 2003. *Joint Position Statement on Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. www.naeyc.org/about/positions/cape.asp.

5. Meisels, S. J. 1987. “Uses and Abuses of Developmental Screening and School Readiness Testing.” *Young Children* 42: 4–6, 68–73; Neisworth, J.T., & S.J. Bagnato. 2004. “The Mismeasure of Young Children: The Authentic Assessment Alternative.” *Infants and Young Children* 17: 198–212.

6. AERA (American Educational Research Association), APA (American Psychological Association), & NCME (National Council for Measurement in Education). 1999. *Standards for Educational & Psychological Testing*. Washington, DC: AERA.

7. Emerging criteria are not used in accreditation decision making.

8. NAEYC. 2005. *Standard 4: Assessment of Child Progress*, 15. Washington, DC: Author.