

Basics of Assessment

A Primer for Early Childhood Educators

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A Definition

Assessment is the basic process of finding out what the children in our classroom, individually and as a group, know and can do in relation to their optimum development and to the goals of the program. With that knowledge of those children, we can plan appropriate curriculum and effective instructional strategies to help them develop and learn, monitoring their progress along the way.

In the current climate you are likely to hear the term *assessment* used for almost any type of appraisal of young children for a range of purposes. Many people use the term loosely, as a broad label for any and all of the varied ways we might determine “where a child is” in development and learning—maybe a vocabulary test, a brief observation, a fine motor skills checklist, a diagnostic reading test, or a height and weight measurement.

But assessment as described in this booklet has a more specific meaning: *Assessment is the process of gathering information about children from several forms of evidence, then organizing and interpreting that information.*

As this basic definition makes clear, sound child assessment is not based on a single measure.

evidence—An outward sign or indication. In child assessment, this would be an indication of a child’s development or learning.

standardized test—A test specially constructed according to a set of testing standards (see AERA/APA/NCME 1999). It requires a trained examiner to administer and interpret its scores.

The use of **standardized tests** in the early childhood classroom is controversial. Standardized test results should never be the sole form of evidence we look at. Too many factors make it difficult to use standardized tests with young children successfully (more on this in a later section). In some situations a standardized test can contribute useful information, but one or even several such tests alone would not constitute adequate assessment of young children.

Fortunately, everyday classroom experiences present many opportunities for children to demonstrate their development and learning. For example, we can appraise a child's oral language development by listening to her converse with other children in a variety of work and play situations, talking with her informally, checking on her contributions to group discussions, evaluating her ability to follow oral directions, seeing whether other adults can understand her, and asking her to point to or name pictures on a worksheet. Again, any one of these individual assessments would not provide enough evidence on its own.

Meaningful child assessment always involves our looking at information from multiple sources gathered over time before drawing conclusions about a young child's development and learning.

Deciding *why* we are assessing is the critical first step in the assessment process (see the section THE PROCESS OF ASSESSMENT). A look at all the important objectives we can meet with assessment highlights why it is so fundamental to good teaching (see WHY WE ASSESS YOUNG CHILDREN). But any assessment, however well-intentioned, serves children only when it is soundly constructed and sensitively administered (see SOUND ASSESSMENT IS ...).

The push for systematic assessment and the focus on achievement are great these days. But child assessment is not something new and wholly different for early childhood educators. We have always observed children, talked with them about what they were doing, noted interesting and unique things they did and said, recorded their accomplishments in development and learning, and shared information with families.

The Process of Assessment

Think of the process of assessment as a cycle of interrelated, basic decisions. The cycle begins with how we answer the first, critical question:

- What is our purpose for assessment?

For that purpose, then,

- What area or areas of children's development and learning should we assess?
- When is the appropriate time to assess?
- How can we gather information about what children know and can do?
- What does the information we gather mean?
- What use do we make of the information?

This cycle gives us a systematic way of thinking about assessment, of making adjustments as we go in light of our results. It is a way of understanding where and how assessment fits into a good program for helping young children develop and learn.

Why We Assess Young Children

Asked why they do assessment, many early childhood educators might answer, “Because it’s expected and required.” That is often true, but there are four even more important reasons why we might assess young children.

To monitor children’s development and learning

We assess to find out “where children are” in any particular aspect of their growth, development, and learning—individually or as a group, at that moment and over time. For example,

Where do this child’s skills at letter recognition stand in relation to the goals of our program?

How are these children doing compared with what we know about typical physical development for 7- and 8-year-olds?

Some of the children started the year having trouble sharing; how have they been doing lately?

These snapshots of growth and learning over time help us identify and anticipate children’s strengths and needs. We cannot effectively plan and tailor a program to build on those strengths and meet those needs without this vital information.

To guide our planning and decision making

We use the information we gather about these specific children in this specific classroom to guide our planning and decision making—that is, what books to read; what activities, experiences, and materials to provide; what instructional strategies to use. For example,

If we find that some of the children have difficulty recalling and talking about the main events in a story they have just heard, we plan learning activities to help them.

If we find that Amy cannot play and work with others without constant conflict, we figure out things to do to help her learn to get along.

If the children have large motor skills beyond what we expect for their age but are way behind in the fine motor control necessary for school tasks, we devise interesting ways to help them develop eye-hand coordination and control of finger, hand, and arm muscles.

To identify children who might benefit from special services

The early childhood years are often the occasion for hearing, vision, and immunization checks as well as for identification of possible speech and language impairment, emotional disturbance, physical disabilities, developmental disabilities, and other conditions that call for special services. Initial identification of a possible problem might come from the teacher, from an alert parent, or through **screening**. If a potential problem is detected, the next step is a referral for an in-depth appraisal by a specialist or team of specialists who determine whether special services are needed, and if so, develop a plan to assist the child. For example,

Buddy was not talking at all in the classroom, so his teacher referred him to a specialist for an in-depth evaluation.

Ling's vision screening prompted the school nurse to suggest to her parents that Ling be checked by an eye doctor.

screening—A brief, relatively inexpensive, standardized procedure designed to quickly appraise a large number of children to find out which ones should be referred for further assessment.

program evaluation—

A process that looks at factors relating to the quality of the classroom. Program evaluation doesn't always require information about the children who are in the program.

accountability—Holding teachers and programs responsible for meeting a required level of performance. Accountability requirements can include what children should learn and be able to do.

To report to and communicate with others

Some assessment information is collected to be shared among specialists, educators, and researchers. As classroom teachers, we must be familiar with assessment concepts and practices in order to understand what specialists and researchers are saying and to make use of the important evidence about children we have accumulated day after day.

Some assessment information is to be shared with families and community members. We must be able to explain assessment concepts and results to them in everyday language. All early childhood educators need to know and be able to explain why assessing young children's development and learning is far more than just giving a test.

Assessment information is also used for **program evaluation** and for **accountability** (e.g., to determine whether the program meets state or federal mandates regarding student achievement). Classroom teachers might help to collect information for those purposes, especially when evidence from classroom-based assessments such as those described in this booklet is required. Sometimes the assessment is done by outside evaluators or specialists.