The response

In the March 2013 Focus on Ethics column, we asked readers to share their experiences with assessment of children to learn if, and to what extent, it is raising ethical issues. We were interested in the kinds of assessments educators are using, the impact of the growing demand for testing, who is requiring the assessments, and how the results are used. We wondered what impact assessment practices are having on children, teachers, and programs, and how NAEYC readers think early childhood educators should respond. The feedback we received at NAEYC’s 2013 National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development (“the Institute”) in San Francisco confirmed that assessment is, indeed, a serious concern for many early childhood educators. We wish to thank all those who have shared their feedback with us about current assessment practices, particularly participants in the session we conducted called “Focus on Ethics: What Ethical Issues Are Facing the Field Now?” and participants in Stephanie and Cate Herman’s session on ethical issues related to child assessment. We also want to thank Christine Lux at Montana State University for her thoughtful comments about assessment, and Hawaii early childhood educators Phyllis Ida, Laura Imai, and Roshanna Zeprun for helping us further understand the issues.

What we learned from these sessions and conversations is that ethical issues in assessment are to a great extent associated with the increased demand for reading and math achievement tests in the early grades. Testing and test results are used in various ways, one of which is to prepare children for federally required tests administered in third grade and beyond as part of the requirements for federal funding. Issues related to assessment are complex and multifaceted, so it is not possible to examine this topic in-depth in a single column. From all the situations that have been described to us, we have chosen one about standardized testing in kindergarten. We have heard it repeated many times from teachers working in public school settings.

The dilemma

Darla is a kindergarten teacher at Harborview, a public school in a community where most families have low incomes. Third grade reading scores at Harborview have dropped dramatically in the last few years. The state and district offices of education have placed considerable pressure on Harborview’s administrators, as well as administrators of other low-performing schools in the district, to implement strategies that will raise third grade reading scores. In order to get children ready for higher academic expectations and the federally mandated third grade test, district administrators have decided that teachers will administer a standardized test of reading and math achievement to all kindergarten children in the district to demonstrate that they are making progress toward reaching the district’s goals for what children know and are able to do.

Darla prides herself on providing many opportunities for the children she teaches to have meaningful, hands-on learning experiences and to feel good about themselves as learners. When she administered this test for the first time last year children started the task with enthusiasm, but as they worked on the test they became...
restless and showed signs of discomfort. Darla observed behaviors that seemed to indicate that the testing situation was undermining children's confidence and that it was causing them unwarranted stress.

Darla's school still requires that the test be administered to kindergartners. Since test data are used for the purpose of demonstrating program accountability, the test does not provide information about what individual children have learned that could help to inform Darla's instruction in the classroom. She also is convinced that the paper-and-pencil format of the test is not appropriate for kindergartners—particularly children like those she teaches, many of whom are dual language learners who are still building their skills in English and may not be able to read and answer the test's questions. Darla knows that for some children the test-taking will be stressful, and at the same time she understands her obligation to follow the district mandate. What should she do? How can she use the NAEYC Code to guide her thinking and decision making?

**Resolving this dilemma**

We will use the same steps for systematically applying the NAEYC Code to an ethical dilemma that we have employed in previous Focus on Ethics columns. The input we received from participants at our sessions at the Institute and our conversations with other concerned educators informed the discussion that follows.

1. **Identify the problem and determine if it involves ethics.**

When you encounter a situation that appears to have a moral dimension, the first thing to do is determine if it involves ethics (the terms right and wrong or fair and unfair can be applied) and if it is an ethical dilemma (it has at least two possible justifiable resolutions). If you determine that you are dealing with a dilemma, you should first consider principle P-1.1 from the Code: “Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children.”

In this situation, the teacher's observations lead her to conclude that the required test has the potential to harm children and that she therefore has an ethical obligation to help keep them safe. But the current accountability requirements make it difficult for her to know what to do, since district administrators are convinced that testing is essential for determining if children are progressing satisfactorily and for holding schools accountable for meeting academic standards.

When she thinks about the situation, Darla concludes that she is, in fact, facing an ethical dilemma. It is clear to her that what she thinks is good for the kindergartners she teaches is in conflict with what the district administrators are requiring her to do.

2. **Identify the stakeholders affected by the situation and Darla's responsibilities to each one.**

Those with an interest in an ethical situation are referred to as stakeholders to suggest that they have a stake in the outcome. In this situation, Darla is called on to balance her responsibilities of ensuring the well-being of the children with her responsibility to follow district mandates. She does not believe that the test is appropriate for the age group she works with or that it will provide teachers with useful information. Last year she saw that the test-taking experience was stressful for some of the children. On the other hand, she is well aware that school and district administrators are taking these test scores very seriously, and she appreciates that as an employee she has an obligation to follow district policies.

3. **Brainstorm possible resolutions.**

There are two obvious resolutions to this situation. Darla can meet the school and district requirements and administer the test, or she can refuse to administer it. Refusing to give the test would be a controversial action and could lead to serious consequences that could include losing her job. Darla loves teaching, and she realizes that this option would not be good for her or for the children. Refusing to give the test is not a viable option for most teachers who work in public schools. So what can Darla do? What is the best course of action for addressing this dilemma?

4. **Consider ethical finesse.**

As we have pointed out in previous columns, it is important for educators to consider ethical finesse (finding a way to meet the needs of everyone involved without having to make a difficult decision) when addressing ethical dilemmas. Since it is not really possible for Darla to refuse to administer the test, she can consider alternatives. Using her observation data and research about the effects of inappropriate testing on young children, Darla can advocate for the needs of the children and work to change the policy. This is probably the most feasible course of action in this situation.

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**Definitions**

A standardized test is an assessment specifically constructed according to a set of testing standards. It requires a trained examiner to administer and interpret its scores. Standardized tests are administered in the same way to all children, and all children are evaluated or scored using the same criteria.

An achievement test is a standardized test designed to measure the extent to which children have acquired specific content or mastered identified skills. Data from achievement tests are used to compare individual children's performance with that of other children who have taken the same test (McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova 2004).
This action would not meet Darla's desire to protect the children from taking the test. But it has potential to improve the situation for children in the future while preserving Darla's good relationship with her employer.

5 Look for guidance in the NAEYC Code.

In 2005, when the Code was revised to address the accelerating emphasis on assessment, new items were added to the sections that address responsibilities to children, families, and community and society. These items can be grouped into three categories: (1) providing guidelines for appropriate assessment practices, (2) addressing the appropriate use of assessment results, and (3) creating the expectation that early childhood educators advocate for assessment systems that respect children's vulnerabilities and support the implementation of quality programming. The following are the items that are relevant to Darla's situation.

**Appropriate assessment practices**

**I-1.6**—To use assessment instruments and strategies that are appropriate for the children to be assessed, that are used only for the purposes for which they were designed, and that have the potential to benefit children.

**P-1.5**—We shall use appropriate assessment systems, which include multiple sources of information, to provide information on children's learning and development.

**Appropriate uses of assessment**

**I-1.7**—To use assessment information to understand and support children's development and learning, to support instruction, and to identify children who may need additional services.

**P-2.7**—We shall inform families about the nature and purpose of the program's child assessments and how data about their child will be used.

**Calls for advocacy**

**I-4.5**—To work to ensure that appropriate assessment systems, which include multiple sources of information, are used for purposes that benefit children.

**P-4.5**—We shall be knowledgeable about the appropriate use of assessment strategies and instruments and interpret results accurately to families.

These items in the Code of Ethical Conduct are consistent with and reinforce NAEYC's 2003 joint position statement “Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation,” developed in conjunction with the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). It states: Make ethical, appropriate, valid, and reliable assessment a central part of all early childhood programs.

To assess young children's strengths, progress, and needs, use assessment methods that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily activities, supported by professional development, inclusive of families, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes: (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. (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2003, 2)

These items in the NAEYC Code identify important ethical dimensions of assessing young children. In Darla's case they underline the fact that the required assessment does not appear to be designed to benefit children by informing classroom practice. When Darla looks at these items in conjunction with principle P-1.1, which states that early childhood educators shall not harm children, she is even more concerned about administering the test.

While Darla is concerned that this test may negatively impact children's self-esteem and cause undue stress to some children, she is also committed to upholding the Responsibilities to Employers identified in the NAEYC Code, this item in particular:

**P-3B.1**—We shall follow all program policies. When we do not agree with program policies, we shall attempt to effect change through constructive action within the organization.

6 Identify the most ethical defensible course of action.

Even though Darla considers refusing to give the test, she soon realizes that this is not a viable course of action if she wants to maintain the support of school and district administrators. But it is clear to her that she has a moral obligation to ensure children's well-being, and that she is called on to do something about her concerns. She decides that she will administer the test, but in efforts to protect the young children she teaches she will become an advocate for appropriate assessment practices. First she will do some research about the impact of testing on young children, and then she will talk with her colleagues to see if anyone shares her concerns and wishes to join her in discussing these concerns with the principal. Next she will let her school principal know what she has learned about potential negative consequences of the test. Then she will consider what other actions are appropriate in this situation. She will then do what she can to curtail testing and ameliorate its effects on children.

**Recommendations to the field**

Here are some of the things that Darla and other teachers facing ethical dilemmas relating to assessment can do.
Inform themselves. Teachers can learn about appropriate assessment and be aware of possible negative consequences of inappropriate assessment for young children. They can review research findings showing that test results may not be valid and reliable due to the difficulty of administering tests to young children. The tests may be beyond children’s developmental capabilities, or the children’s behavior may be unduly influenced by mood or by the test situation.

One place to begin is by studying Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How, the National Research Council’s 2008 report on child assessment that emphasizes both the positive aspects of assessment as well as cautions about misuse. NAEYC materials include

- NAEYC’s publications and website, particularly resources accessed through the Public Policy page at www.naeyc.org/policy
- Position statement on “Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation” (developed in collaboration with NAECs/SDE), with expanded resources, and the Where We Stand summary in English and Spanish at www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/cape
- Developing Kindergarten Readiness and Other Large Scale Assessment Systems: Necessary Considerations in the Assessment of Young Children report at www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/research/Assessment_Systems.pdf
- Basics of Assessment: A Primer for Early Childhood Professionals by Oralie McAfee, Deborah J. Leong, and Elena Bodrova

In the classroom. It is important for teachers to have confidence that an intentionally designed hands-on curriculum can address standards effectively while preparing children with the knowledge and skills they are expected to acquire. That means that ethical teachers will resist the temptation to teach to the test and will avoid overemphasizing test-taking skills to the exclusion of other worthwhile content.

In the school. Concerned teachers can become informed advocates for appropriate assessment practices through collegial dialogue about issues relating to testing young children with fellow teachers and school administrators. It is important for teachers to articulate positions clearly as they let the school community know what they believe and why. These advocacy efforts are likely to be more effective when like-minded colleagues join together to speak out about appropriate assessment strategies and uses of assessment results.

In the community. When teachers, families, and community members are familiar with the issues related to child assessment, they can help policy makers understand the risks to young children of inappropriate assessments. Teachers can write letters to the local newspaper about the need for appropriate testing practices, present workshops or panels about issues in

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testing at a local AEYC meeting (or a meeting of another association concerned with early childhood education), and provide written or oral testimony regarding legislation relating to testing.

Materials from advocacy groups such as Defending the Early Years (www.deyproject.org) can also help teachers stay up-to-date on current developments, and get involved in public efforts to protect young children from the potential ill effects of inappropriate assessments. In all of these efforts, teachers can share the fact that multiple measures provide a better sense of a child’s development and help to shape effective curriculum.

We hope that reading this dilemma will encourage early childhood educators to consider the ethical dimensions of assessing young children, particularly in the area of testing academic achievement. We encourage you to add your voice to those of other advocates committed to ensuring that assessment is beneficial for children and does not put them at risk from potentially harmful practices.

New Ethical Issue—Reporting Classroom Behavior

Four-year-old Joseph’s use of aggressive behavior has been a challenge for the past month. Just yesterday he kicked and injured a classmate on the playground, and unfortunately these types of incidents have become more frequent. His teacher, Arlene, has discussed the problem with his parents and has been developing a plan with her coteacher and director to help him channel his energy and emotions in more positive directions. Arlene was glad when Joseph’s mother, Victoria, stopped by the classroom recently, but Arlene didn’t know how to respond when Victoria reminded Arlene how important it is to her and her husband that Joseph behave in school. Victoria asked Arlene to report to her immediately if Joseph misbehaved so that they can punish him. Arlene is concerned about this request because she suspects that this family’s approach to discipline is quite harsh, based on her previous conversations with Victoria and her observations of how the family interacted during a recent supper held at the school.

To resolve this dilemma, follow Steps 1–6 as presented on pages 85–86. When you have completed your analysis and come up with a proposed course of action for Arlene, send an email to the coeditors. Include your recommendation and a brief description of how you combined the Code (and, if necessary, the Supplement for Program Administrators) and your professional judgment to reach this resolution.

**Respond to this dilemma**

This column is designed to involve the readers of Young Children. Email your proposed resolution to Arlene’s situation to the coeditors. Be sure to use the subject line “NAEYC ethics.” Responses should be no more than 500 words and must be received by April 28, 2014. Our analysis will appear in the September 2014 issue.

... or send us one from your experience

We hope you will share with us an ethical dilemma you have encountered in your workplace to be considered for presentation in this column. Send a short (400–500 words) description of the situation to the coeditors. Be sure to use the subject line “NAEYC ethics.”

Contact the coeditors by email: Stephanie Feeney at feeney@hawaii.edu and Nancy Freeman at nkfusc@gmail.com.

**References**


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Left: 2012 NAEYC Annual Conference Lasting Legacy Scholarship winners.
Top: 2013 NAEYC National Institute Lasting Legacy Scholarship winners with Diane Trister Dodge (standing, center).