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Preschool *Policy Facts*

Preschool Assessment:
A Guide to Developing a Balanced Approach

by Ann S. Epstein, Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Andrea DeBruin-Parecki and Kenneth B. Robin

Child assessment is a vital and growing component of high-quality early childhood programs. Not only is it an important tool in understanding and supporting young children's development, it is essential to document and evaluate program effectiveness. For assessment to be widely used though, it must employ methods that are feasible, sustainable and reasonable with regard to demands on budgets, educators and children.

Equally important, it must meet the challenging demands of validity (accuracy and effectiveness) for young children. It is the balance between efficiency and validity that demands the constant attention of policymakers — and an approach grounded in a sound understanding of appropriate methodology.

What We Know:

- Assessment is an ongoing process that includes collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information about pupils, the classroom and their instruction.

- Testing is one form of assessment that, appropriately applied, systematically measures skills such as literacy and numeracy.

- While it does not provide a complete picture, testing is an important tool, for both its efficiency and ability to measure prescribed bodies of knowledge.

- Alternative or "authentic" forms of assessment can be culturally sensitive and pose an alternative to testing, but they require a larger investment in establishing criteria for judging development and training evaluators.

- Child assessment has value that goes well beyond measuring progress in children – to evaluating programs, identifying staff development needs and planning future instruction.

- The younger the child, the more difficult it is to obtain valid assessments. Early development is rapid, episodic and highly influenced by experience. Performance on an assessment is affected by children's emotional states and the conditions of the assessment.

Policy Recommendations:

- Require that measures included in an assessment be selected by qualified professionals to ensure that they are reliable, valid and appropriate for the children being assessed.

- Develop systems of analyses so that test scores are interpreted as part of a broader assessment that may include observations, portfolios, or ratings from teachers and/or parents.

- Base policy decisions on an evaluation of data that reflects all aspects of children's development – cognitive, emotional, social, and physical.

- Involve teachers and parents in the assessment process so that children's behaviors and abilities can be understood in various contexts and cooperative relationships among families and school staff can be fostered.

- Provide training for early childhood teachers and administrators to understand and interpret standardized tests and other measures of learning and development. Emphasize precautions specific to the assessment of young children.

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Why Assessment is Important

Assessment of preschool-age children who may not reliably or uniformly respond to inquiry has been the subject of much debate. The growing emphasis on testing young children as a means of holding programs accountable for their learning has intensified the discussion. Though there are legitimate concerns regarding standardized testing, it and other forms of assessment are necessary components of all high-quality early education programs.

Properly conceived assessments are important to understanding and supporting young children's development. They are also essential to documenting and evaluating how effectively programs are meeting young children's educational needs. For assessments to be effective, they must be practical, cost-efficient and meet reasonable standards of efficiency and validity.

Testing usually involves a series of direct requests for children to perform, within a set amount of time, specific tasks designed and administered by adults. These tasks have predetermined answers. Alternative forms of assessment are more open-ended and often look at performance over an extended period. Examples include structured observations, portfolio analyses of individual and collaborative work, and teacher and parent ratings of children's behavior.

What Can Be Learned

Assessment can provide the following four types of information for and about children and their parents, teachers and programs:

• Screen children to see if they need intervention—particularly when parents and teachers suspect a problem.

• Plan instruction for individuals and groups of children.

• Identify program improvement and staff development needs.

• Evaluate how well a program is meeting goals and needs for children. Data should be aggregated to determine whether desired outcomes are being achieved.

"Assessment is the process of collecting, synthesizing and interpreting information to aid classroom decision-making. It includes information gathered about pupils, instruction and classroom climate.

"Testing is a formal, systematic procedure for gathering a sample of pupils' behavior. The results of a test are used to make generalizations about how pupils would have performed on similar but untested behaviors."

— Peter Airasian, *Assessment in the Classroom*

Assessment Methods

The quality of an assessment depends in part on decisions made before any measure is administered to a child. Project designers should be able to explain why specific measures are used and what they hope to learn from the results. Assessment strategies can be formal (standardized testing) or informal (observation, portfolios, teacher and parent ratings).

The selection of a strategy is guided by the purposes and goals of the assessment and is also affected by the available resources in terms of time, money and staff. Formal and informal assessment strategies each have strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment requires a multi-method approach in order to encompass the many dimensions of children's skills and abilities.

Standardized Testing
- Most rigid of assessment strategies, places the greatest constraints on children's behavior. Considered objective, time- and cost-efficient, and suitable for making quantitative comparisons of aggregated data across groups.

- Preschoolers' performance is highly influenced by children's emotional states and experiences, sometimes causing unstable scores over time. Most individual tests of cognitive ability must be administered in a controlled, relatively quiet area.

Observations
- Intrude minimally into children's activities, which naturally integrate all dimension of development—intellectual, motivational, social, physical, aesthetic, etc.

- Should be used to complete developmental scales of proven reliability and validity, they are not sufficient alone.

Portfolios
- Involve multiple sources and methods of data collection, and occur over a representative period of time. A collection of student work, the process provides richer information than standardized tests.

- Encourage collaboration – between students, teachers, and parents – and integrate assessment with instruction and learning.

Teacher Ratings
- Can be used to assess children's cognitive and language abilities as well as social and emotional development.

- Can be specifically related to other types of assessments, including standardized test scores, other validated assessment tools, or global assessments of children's traits.

Parent Ratings
- Encourage parents to observe and listen to their children.

- Inform parents about the important behaviors and milestones in young children's development and allows teachers to involve parents as partners in assessment.

Issues and positions involving assessment are summarized in a document from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) titled *Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment and Program Evaluation: Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8.*

Reliable and Valid Preschool Assessment

Given the pervasive use of testing and its probable expansion, when and under what conditions can this type of assessment be used appropriately with preschool-age children? What characteristics of tests and their administration will guarantee that we "do no harm" to children and that we "do help" adults acquire valid information? Also, given that even the most well-designed tests can provide only limited data, how can we maximize the use of non-test assessments so they add valuable information beyond that obtained through standardized testing procedures?

To produce meaningful data and minimize the risk of creating a harmful situation, all assessment tools for preschool-age children, whether formal or informal, should satisfy the following criteria:

• Assessment should not threaten children's self-esteem, make them feel they have failed, or penalize them for what they do not know.

• Information should be obtained over time, or if time-distributed measurements are not feasible, unusual circumstances in the situation (e.g., noise) or child (e.g., fatigue) should be noted to avoid invalid, single-encounter results.

• Information should be obtained on the same content area from multiple and diverse sources, such as standardized tests, classroom observations and parent ratings, especially when repeated instances of data gathering are not feasible.

• The length of the assessment should be sensitive to young children's interests and attention spans and therefore should probably not exceed 35-45 minutes.

• Testing for purposes of program accountability should be administered to a representative sample of students whenever feasible to reduce the overall time spent in testing and to minimize the chances for placing undue stress on children and burden on teachers and classrooms.

To be reliable and valid, standardized testing should:

• Contain enough items to allow scores to represent this diverse range of individual ability, in order to identify and distinguish among children of low, average and high levels of ability.

• Take place in a controlled environment that at least approximates the conditions experienced by the population on which the measure was standardized.

• Be administered by appropriately trained examiners who are familiar with testing materials and procedures and with working with young children.

To obtain scores that resemble natural performance, informal assessments should:

• Take place in or simulate the natural environment in which the behavior being evaluated occurs to avoid measuring the child's response to an artificial environment rather than the child's ability to perform on the content.

• Be conducted by an assessor who is knowledgeable regarding the assessment materials and familiar with the children being assessed. When an outside researcher or evaluator must administer the assessment, it is best if the individual spends time in the classroom beforehand.

• Measure real knowledge in the context of real activities, resembling children's ordinary activities as closely as possible. In addition, parent or teacher ratings should evaluate naturally occurring behavior.

• Be conducted as a natural part of daily activities rather than as a time-added or pullout activity.

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