

Assessing Development and Learning in Young Children

A POSITION STATEMENT OF THE
Southern Early Childhood Association

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The Purpose of Assessment

The purpose of assessment of young children is to collect information necessary to make important decisions about their developmental and educational needs. Assessment must always serve in ways that enhance opportunities for optimal growth, development, and learning. The process of determining individual developmental and educational needs informs early childhood education practices and provides a template for setting individual and program goals.

The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) recognizes and endorses the important role of assessment in planning quality programs for young children.

- SECA supports assessment strategies that are age and individually appropriate and culturally sensitive and that provide valid information that is readily usable for program planning.
- SECA opposes procedures that cannot clearly be shown to serve the best interests of children and teachers and the use of any standardized tests or assessment procedures for purposes other than that for which they are specifically designed. Mass testing of young children is widespread in early childhood education programs in spite of the fact that there is no empirical evidence that such testing of young children contributes to their growth, development, learning, or their daily well-being. The inappropriate use of standardized tests or assessment procedures is a breach of professional ethics.

Best practices for the assessment of young children include carefully selected informal and formal strategies that measure specific characteristics over several designated periods of time and in many different contexts. Such assessment more accurately provides a broad picture of child growth, development, and learning from which wise decisions regarding the needs of individuals can be made.

What are the Differences Between Formal and Informal Assessment?

Formal assessments usually entail the use of standardized tests -- tests that must be administered according to prescribed time limits, instructional and scoring procedures, and administration guidelines. Scores are usually compared to the scores of a normative (or comparison) group. Formal tests usually fall into the following categories:

- Achievement tests
- Readiness tests
- Developmental screening tests
- Intelligence tests
- Diagnostic tests

Informal assessments rely more heavily on observational and work sampling techniques that continually focus on child performance, processes, and products over selected periods of time and in a variety of contexts. Portfolio systems for tracking various elements of assessment are typically utilized.

What do the terms “Reliability” and “Validity” mean?

Reliability refers to the consistency with which an assessment strategy (whether formal or informal) produces the same or similar results for the same individual from one administration of the assessment to the next. Because young children are growing and changing at a rapid pace, and their behavior and performance can be quite unpredictable from day to day, few assessments or tests administered to young children can claim high reliability. Assessments must be continually compared to prior ones in order to determine if assessment information truly reflects lasting rather than temporary characteristics. Validity refers to the degree to which an assessment or test measures what it claims to measure. Validity is generally determined by comparing or contrasting scores or outcomes with some stated criterion or construct. Sampling children’s work over time is crucial to ensure validity. With young children, it may take as many as six or more examples of similar types of work in order to make valid assumptions about a particular skill, performance, or attainment of a prescribed developmental or learning goal.

“True, all children need to experience their competence to build self-respect. But each child needs to feel that his person is cherished regardless of his competence.”

-- Dorothy Corkille Briggs (date unknown)

Concerns About Group Testing of Young Children:

- Few, if any standardized, group administered tests are responsive to the wide range of growth rates and abilities inherent in every age group of children -- a biological fact that is independent of predetermined curricula and attainment goals.
- Few standardized, group administered tests are responsive to the attributes and needs of children with disabilities or the wide range of sociocultural and language diversity characteristics represented in the child population of the United States today.

- Too many formal testing practices require rote memorization activities, paper-and-pencil tasks, and skill-and-drill reviews -- activities that are clearly at odds with what is known about how young children learn, sustain curiosity and interest, and retain information.
- Few standardized tests are designed to take into consideration the young child's limited test-taking ability--handling test booklets, pencils and other test artifacts, following verbal directions, ignoring distractions, adhering to time constraints, making acute visual discriminations, using language efficiently and effectively, or sitting for extended periods of time.
- Parents can easily be misled about the developmental progress of their children when assessment practices are not sufficiently comprehensive to include well-designed observation and performance based assessments to augment formal test scores.
- Children compared to a normative group who fall below the norm on a standardized test are at risk of being misdiagnosed and assigned to inappropriate and ineffective "interventions" or "remediation" when assessment is limited to group score comparisons.
- Children are subjected to a plethora of tests throughout their schooling years. Time spent on preparing children for tests, testing, retesting, and remediation reduces schooling to curriculum starved educational practices and knowledge deprived learners. The limited content of the test becomes the limited content of the curriculum.
- Typically, the results of standardized, group-administered tests are provided to teachers too late to be used in a timely manner to inform intervention, remediation, instruction, or curriculum.
- Contemporary standards-based curricula, while providing a framework for setting learning goals, has led to over-reliance on standardized tests to measure group attainment and exact accountability, often with high stakes consequences for individual children.

Misuses of Test Data

Tests are not adequate tools for accountability. Achievement tests do not measure what children are learning and do not provide accurate information about the education of children. Therefore, test data should not be used as proof of the quality of the education that children receive.

The public and professionals alike share a common misconception that test scores are objective and scientific. This faulty assumption leads to an unjustified confidence in and reliance on test scores for decision-making. This means that judgments about children

are based on faulty data rather than data which reflect each child's personal course of development.

People outside the profession often misuse tests for their own purposes. Politicians frequently use test scores to show that a vote for them will be a vote for better education. Test scores are frequently misused to justify budget requests, to judge teachers, and to determine merit pay. Schools frequently misuse tests to compare classrooms of children and to screen out the "undesirable" or those children who supposedly cannot benefit from their program.

Criteria for Appropriate Assessment

Effective assessment of young children

- Emphasizes emerging development in all developmental domains: physical/motor, psychosocial, cognitive, language, and literacy development
- Focuses on individual strengths and uniqueness
- Is based on sound principles of child growth and development
- Emanates from authentic (logical, meaningful, relevant, and applicable) curricula
- Is intertwined with instruction
- Is performance, process, and product based
- Is ongoing and occurs in many contexts
- Recognizes and supports different intelligences and learning styles
- Minimizes or alleviates child stress to ensure best (or most successful) outcomes
- Is reflective and analytic, honest and accurate, instructive and useful
- Is collaborative with learners, parents, teachers, and professional specialists as needed

Examples of Appropriate Assessment

Gathering data about children to make judgments about their learning and development is a central part of the teacher's role. Teachers must make daily decisions about children that should be based on accurate and appropriate information. Portfolios, work samples, and teacher observation across time can provide the tools necessary to identify individual strengths and weaknesses.

Information collected should be placed in an assessment portfolio. A portfolio is a record of the teacher's observations and comments as well as a wide selection of the representative work that has been selected by the child and teacher together. Each child should have an assessment portfolio. The portfolio should include, but not be limited to:

Work samples

A collection of informal and formal work, academic and non-academic, that can include samples of writing; processes and results of investigations, problem solving and experiments, including photographs or products; art work; audiotapes; interviews; and lists of books read.

Teacher observations

These can be informal notes on the child's classroom, social and academic interactions, as well as more formal observation records of activities and progress. Parent and other sources of information should be included.

Checklists and inventories

A checklist can indicate activities across a range of developmentally appropriate tasks, abilities and competencies in social, physical, intellectual, emotional and language areas.

Parent conferences

Information should be gathered from the parent's perspective about developmental relationships within the family. This may include the parent's perspective of the social and emotional climate at home.

Teacher constructed tests or projects

These are specially designed activities to provide specific feedback on teacher-initiated or child-chosen learning tasks and to complement work samples and teacher observations with more structured or formal work.

Referral decisions

Comprehensive assessments can include as needed, health and wellness examinations, screening for vision, hearing or speech impairments or psychological or other specialized testing. Accurate records of all referrals for additional professional assessment are maintained and all assessment data are treated confidentially and utilized only by those individuals who have a legitimate use for the information.

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