What Assessment Means to Early Childhood Educators

by Angela Notari-Syverson and Angela Losardo

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Two-year-old Sean doesn't talk as well as other children of his same age. He communicates using gestures and a few one-word phrases, and his articulation is difficult to understand. Is his language delayed? Does he need special services?

Four-year-old Sakara has difficulty paying attention and completing a task. What can teachers do to help her stay more focused?

Teachers in the toddler and preschool rooms of a child care center recently introduced a 15-minute picture book reading time into the daily schedule. Will the increased picture book reading time have an impact on the children's language and literacy development?

These are questions educators might have about the children and families in their programs and about curricula and instructional strategies they use in their classrooms. Observing children and reflecting on educational practices are integral to high-quality care and education programs. A sound assessment system can be a useful tool for guiding early childhood professionals in this process.

What is assessment and why is it important?

Assessment can be defined as the process of gathering ongoing and comprehensive information about specific aspects of a child's knowledge, behavior, skill level, or personality for the purpose of making evaluative decisions (Meisels, 2001). Assessments can be conducted for different purposes. Screening and diagnostic tools were developed to make identification and placement decisions for individual children. *Screening* is a brief procedure that determines whether a child's performance is sufficiently different from the performance of other children of the same chronological age to warrant more comprehensive testing. If there is suspicion of a delay, then a *diagnostic assessment* provides more in-depth information on the spe-

cific nature of the problem. For example, a screening tool such as the *Ages and Stages Questionnaires* (Bricker & Squires, 1999) would be administered to determine whether there is cause for concern about Sean's language development. If results from the screening show a delay, an in-depth assessment is conducted to determine the specific type of delay, the strengths and needs of children, and recommendations for intervention.

Assessments can also be used to identify appropriate curricula and teaching strategies for individual children and to document children's progress over time. For example, teachers can develop a systematic plan to document Sakara's progress in attending to a task and to identify which teaching strategies help her. This type of assessment is referred to as *program assessment*. Program assessment tools can also be used for *program evaluation* purposes when comparing the performance of groups of children before and after instruction. For example, teachers can gather data on children's language and literacy behaviors at the start of the school year, before they begin daily picture book reading, and then again at the end of the year.

Traditional and alternative assessments

A variety of methods and instruments ranging from formal to informal observa-

tions are available for professionals to use when assessing children. Assessment tools can be grouped into two broad categories: traditional and alternative approaches. *Traditional approaches to assessment* usually involve use of standardized tests for screening and diagnostic purposes. Standardized tests are norm-referenced, meaning that a child's performance is compared to that of a normative group of children of the same age, gender, geographic location, income level, disability and/or cultural background. Because items on standardized tests are chosen for their capacity to discriminate between groups of children of different ages, the behaviors tested may not necessarily be educationally relevant. For example, items from standardized tests may include asking the child to remove a large round peg from form board or to point to a pellet in a bottle. Standardized tests do not yield direct information for making program decisions or choosing curricular content, nor do they provide insight into environmental factors and instructional strategies that may promote or hinder a child's progress. The results of this type of test are generally presented as developmental ages, IQs, or percentile scores.

Alternative approaches to assessment provide information about what children know and can do rather than on how they compare to other children. Alternative assessments are the tools of choice for educators, because they can be used to observe children's behaviors in everyday life and classroom activities and routines, as opposed to the highly structured and contrived testing situation typical of standardized tests. Alternative approaches to assessment take into account the complexity and holistic nature of child development and focus on the interrelationships among developmental domains of behavior. For example, a motor impairment in a young child may lead to a problem in oral language development, and a problem in oral language development may

put a child at risk for later problems with literacy.

A comprehensive and holistic view of children can only be obtained if caregivers and teachers collaborate and share information on an ongoing basis. Losardo and Notari-Syverson (2001) describe three approaches to alternative assessment that a) can easily be integrated into and across everyday activities, b) draw from observations and interactions with children and families involved in actual tasks and activities, and c) seek to measure children's learning potential by measuring changes in performance following mediation by an adult.

Curriculum-Based Assessment. Alternative models of assessment include those in which opportunities to observe children's behavior are embedded within the natural context. Children are provided with multiple opportunities to perform skills across domains of development with different people, using different materials, in multiple settings. Embedding opportunities for children to perform skills in everyday activities is facilitated by use of curriculum-based assessments. Curriculum-based assessments (CBAs) are developmental checklists or simple tasks used to measure a child's progressive mastery of a curriculum. Assessment items are usually ordered from simple to more complex and organized by developmental domains (e.g., problem-solving, communication, physical, and socio-emotional development). Two examples of CBA are the *Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System (AEPS) for Infants and Young Children* (Bricker, 2002) and the *Carolina Curriculum* (Johnson-Martin, Attermeier, Hacker, 2004).

Performance Assessment and Portfolios. Performance assessment is a broad term that refers to tasks that give children the opportunity to demonstrate and apply their knowledge. Talking about pictures in a book, riding a tri-

cycle, asking an adult to get a favorite toy out of the child's reach are examples of performance tasks where children can demonstrate a variety of language, literacy, cognitive, social, and motor skills. Tasks completed in real-life contexts (e.g., recognizing one's name on a cubby hole or climbing playground equipment) are referred to as authentic assessment.

Portfolio assessment is a type of performance assessment that refers to the purposeful collection of a child's work documenting the child's effort, progress, or achievement over time. For young children, portfolios may include performance-based samples such as art and drawings, photographs of block constructions, videotapes, developmental checklists, anecdotal notes of teacher observations, and interviews with parents. A widely used example of performance and portfolio assessment for preschool children is the *Work Sampling System (WSS)* (Meisels, Jablon, Marsden, Dictelmiller, & Dorfman, 1994). A similar assessment, the *Ounce Scale* (Meisels, Marsden, Dombro, Weston, & Jewkes, 2003) is available for infants and toddlers.

Portfolios are powerful tools for facilitating communication among professionals and caregivers. Parents can document and share what children can do in familiar and culturally relevant environments, such as the home and community, by recording anecdotal notes, keeping a list of books read with the child, making telephone calls to teachers, or sending photographs and samples of children's work to school. Because portfolios can include a variety of media and products, they are useful to caregivers who do not speak or read English well.

Dynamic Assessment. Dynamic assessment acknowledges that both the adult and the child play an active role in the assessment process. Instead of playing the part of a neutral observer, the exam-

iner interacts with the child during testing by asking questions and providing instructional support for the purpose of determining the child's potential for learning. Dynamic assessment focuses on the child's responsiveness to instruction which can be measured by comparing a child's performance on the same task before and after the intervention, changes in the types and number of prompts used, or the amount of adult support needed to elicit the behaviors. Because the focus is on learning potential rather than what the child already knows, this approach is particularly suitable for assessing young children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Challenges in assessing young children

Early childhood programs are increasingly being asked to adopt accountability approaches that stress results, particularly child outcomes. For example, children in Head Start programs are now being tested for school readiness in early literacy, language, and math skills using the National Reporting System on Child Outcomes, a battery of standardized assessment instruments. It is important that programs carefully consider what methods and tools are most appropriate for young preschool-age children who may not have yet acquired the skills necessary for taking tests (e.g., following directions, answering questions).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends assessment systems that include multiple assessment methods, measures, and sources of information. A single test administered at one point in time is not likely to yield accurate information about a child's knowledge and skills. Young children can be easily distracted and may have difficulty controlling their behavior during testing situations. Standardized measures used with preschool children have poorer reliability and

validity than when used with school-age children. It is important to remember that young children develop at variable rates, not in the linear incremental process assumed by norm-referenced tests.

Assessment for education

Gathering information on children's performance is a valuable strategy to identify children's needs, ensure they are learning, and document changes over time. NAEYC promotes systematic assessment that relies on regular and periodic observations of children engaged in authentic tasks during everyday activities. It is important that programs develop specific plans for conducting assessments, as well as schedules for systematic team reviews of children's learning. Following are some guidelines to consider when planning assessments.

Assess in Meaningful Contexts. Young children develop and learn primarily in the context of everyday interactions with adults during daily routines and activities. Assessment should reflect meaningful real life experiences and be conducted as part of regular classroom activities. Educators can identify specific behaviors that occur during routines and plan to observe individual children during these activities. For example, children's language and communications skills can be observed during snack. Children's knowledge of book conventions can be observed during picture book reading.

Consider Individual and Cultural Factors. Young children are easily influenced by context. It is important to observe how a child's performance may vary across different situations. Some children may talk more during play rather than on demand. Some children may need initial encouragement from an adult in order to complete a task. This type of information is valuable for identifying instructional supports and

strategies that work best for individual children. Alternative assessments that are open-ended and allow for adaptations and accommodations to make a task more engaging and culturally relevant are especially appropriate for use with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and children with disabilities.

Involve Families. A child may display competencies differently in the home, in early childhood programs, and other social settings. Information from family members is critical, especially when the child's family background differs from the mainstream culture and when traditional assessments may underestimate the child's abilities.

Conclusion

Quality programs are built upon careful planning and purposeful teaching that result from making thoughtful, well-informed decisions about what works best and what might need to be improved. Ongoing evaluation and assessment are important parts of this process. Alternative approaches place great importance on observations of young children in the context of everyday interactions, the influence of context and culture on learning, and involvement of families in all aspects of the assessment process. Equally important is the collaboration among practitioners with families in the use of multiple sources of information and methods for assessment.

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Buyer's Guide to Assessment Tools

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