

REPORT BRIEF • OCTOBER 2008

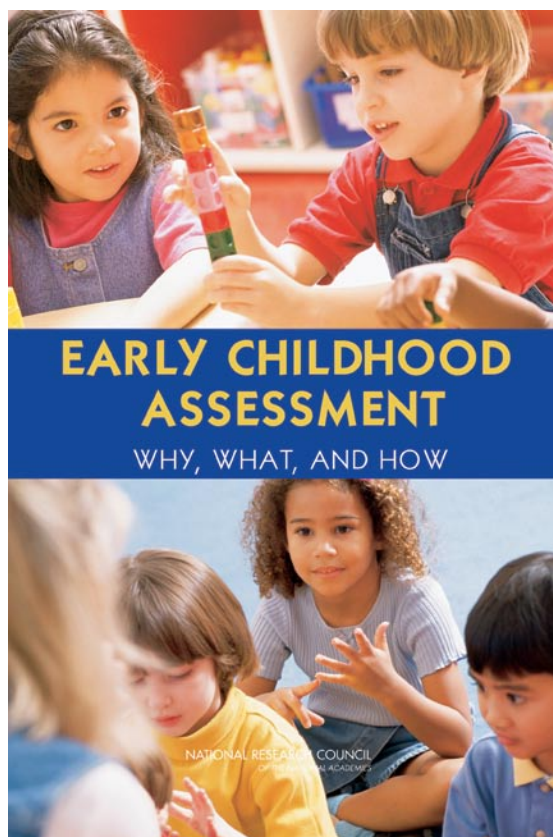
EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT

WHY, WHAT, AND HOW

In the context of an expanding array of programs aimed at early childhood intervention, the assessment of young children's development and learning has recently taken on new importance. Private and government organizations are developing programs to enhance the school readiness of all young children, especially children from economically disadvantaged homes and communities and children with special needs. These programs are designed to enhance social, language, and academic skills through responsive early care and education. In addition, they provide settings to identify and offer appropriate interventions to children with developmental problems.

The expansion of early child care and intervention programs has been accompanied by calls for accountability for these initiatives, especially those that are publicly funded. School systems and government agencies are asked to set goals, establish standards, track progress, analyze strengths and weaknesses in programs, and report on their achievements, with consequences for unmet goals. Early childhood education and intervention programs are increasingly called on to prove their worth in similar ways.

Assessment of children is a frequently used tool for accountability efforts, and it is also used for a number of other purposes in early childhood programs. Many states are considering the use of child assessment as a component of accountability plans for state-funded preschools and similar programs. At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) implemented the National Reporting System (NRS) as a child assessment strategy for the Head Start Program. Although many experts in early childhood development and education recognize the importance of an accountability tool, certain approaches, such as the NRS, have been criticized because they neglect important aspects of child development and fall short in key areas, such as sampling and the selection and training of assessors.

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In this context, in 2006 Congress requested that the National Research Council conduct a study of developmental outcomes and appropriate assessment of young children. With funding from the HHS Office of Head Start, a committee of experts was asked to identify important outcomes for children from birth to age 5 and to review the quality and purposes of different techniques and instruments for assessing development.

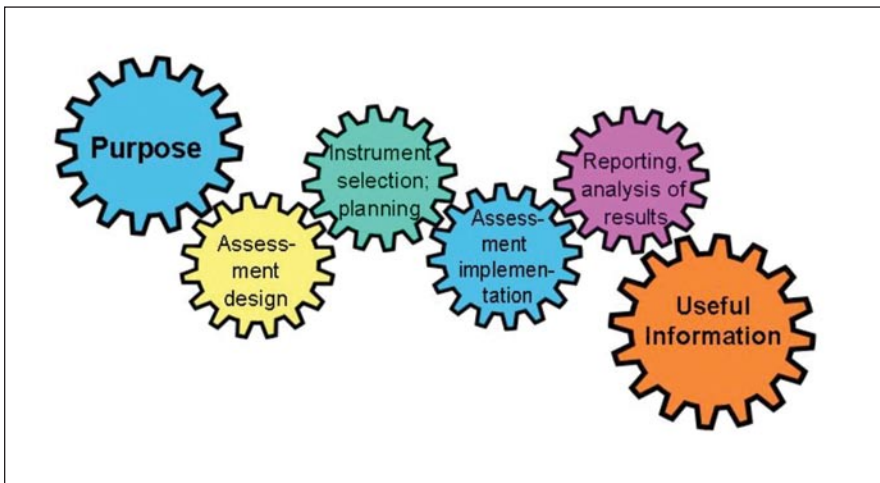


Figure 1. Purpose-driven assessment.

PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

Two key principles support effective assessment.

(1) The *purpose* of an assessment should guide assessment decisions

Good assessments are designed for specific purposes. Assessments may be used to screen for developmental delays, to monitor children's progress, to inform instruction, and to provide information for program evaluation or accountability, among other purposes. The purpose for any assessment must be determined and clearly communicated to all stakeholders *before* the assessment is designed or implemented. Most important, assessment designed for programs should not be used to assess individual children. Because different purposes require different kinds of assessments, the purpose should drive assessment design and implementation decisions (see Figure 1). For example, it may not be necessary to require all children in a program to complete all assessment items when the purpose is to evaluate the program: it may be sufficient to assess a sample of children or to give each child only some of the assessment items (matrix sampling). Similarly, some purposes are best served with direct assessment; for other purposes, observational methods and instruments may be better.

(2) Assessment activity should be conducted within a *coherent system* of health, educational, and

family support services that promote optimal development for all children.

Assessment should be an integral part of a coherent system of early childhood care and education that includes a range of services and resources. The larger system must be able to ensure that:

- Assessments are aligned with other system elements, such as early learning standards or guidelines, program objectives and curriculum, and relevant theories of development and instruction.
- Assessors and those who will interpret and use assessment results are given sufficient training and support to ensure skilled, reliable administration of the assessment instruments and appropriate use of the information generated.
- Infrastructure and resources are available both to perform assessment and to respond constructively to assessment findings with support for professional development, technical assistance, and other program improvement efforts.
- The burden of assessment on both the children to be assessed and the programs they attend is the minimum needed to accomplish the assessment's purpose.

The development of early learning goals and standards, the design of curriculum and teaching

practices, and the selection of assessments should be guided by the same framework that informs the training of beginning teachers and the continuing professional development of experienced teachers. The reporting of assessment results to parents, teachers, and other stakeholders should also be based on this same framework, as should the evaluations of effectiveness built into all systems. Each child should have an equivalent opportunity to achieve the defined goals, and the allocation of resources should reflect those goals.

OUTCOMES AND DOMAINS

Purposeful and systematic assessment requires decisions about what to assess. After extensive review and discussion, the committee selected five domains that build on the school readiness work of the National Education Goals Panel (1995):

- physical well-being and motor development,
- social and emotional development,
- approaches to learning,
- language development (including emergent literacy), and
- cognition and general knowledge (including mathematics and science).

This list reflects state early learning standards, guidelines from organizations focused on the welfare of young children, and the status of available assessment instruments.

INSTRUMENT SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Once a purpose has been established and a set of domains selected, the next challenge is to identify the best instrument(s) to use in the assessment. Issues of psychometric adequacy—particular in the validity of the instrument chosen for all the subgroups of children to be assessed—are paramount in these decisions. The committee's report discusses the need for qualified persons to make selection decisions and provides criteria for evaluating assessment instruments, examples of how to apply the criteria, and referrals to continuously updated sources of technical information on assessment instruments.

The implementation of an assessment should be carefully planned and thoroughly prepared. Clear plans for follow-up steps that use the information productively and appropriately are needed. Primary caregivers should be informed in advance about the purposes and focus of the assessment.

Assessors, teachers, and program administrators should be able to articulate the purpose of assessments to parents and others. Assessors should be trained to meet a clearly specified level of expertise in administering assessments, should be monitored systematically, and should be reevaluated occasionally. Those who will analyze, interpret, and report assessment results should have adequate training and technical support.

CONSEQUENCES AND CAUTIONS

The assessment of young children can offer many benefits, but it also has the potential to do harm if not done right. Well-planned and effective assessments can inform teaching and foster program improvement and contribute to better outcomes for children. However, assessments that are poorly planned or designed, poorly implemented, or whose results are interpreted and used inappropriately can mislabel children or reduce resources for programs.

As the consequences of assessment findings become more serious, the quality of assessment designs and the suitability and psychometric quality of the instruments used must be more certain. While decisions based on the assessment of one child can be important to that child and her family and thus must be taken with caution, assessments of groups of children that are used for purposes of program evaluation and accountability can have major consequences for the program itself, the community served by the program, and for policy. These consequences include de-funding a program, closing a center, or dismissing a teacher. The committee emphasizes that use of child assessments as a source of information for "high stakes" program evaluation decisions is appropriate, but only if other information about programs is given appropriate weight in decision making and if strong safeguards are in place to prevent unintended use or misuse of assessment information.

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Copies of the report, *Early Childhood Assessment: Why, What, and How* are available for sale from the National Academies Press at (888) 624-8373 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington, DC metropolitan area) or via the NAP homepage www.nap.edu. Full text of the report and a free PDF copy of the Summary are also available at www.nap.edu. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of HHS.

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