



Position Statement on Appropriate Assessment of Children from Birth to Age 8

The general public has become aware of the importance of the early years of a child's development.¹ Parents, funding agencies, and taxpayers want to be assured that children are progressing well and that early childhood programs are doing a good job in helping children learn. Consequently, there is increased pressure to assess young children's development to determine whether individual children are learning and to hold programs accountable for children's learning.

Assessment is the continual process of collecting information to measure the level of performance of a child or group of children. Observation of children during on-going classroom activities is an informal form of assessment. Testing is a formal form of assessment in which specific tasks are set up to measure performance and for which a distinction is made between a correct and an incorrect response. Often the observations of a child by parents and staff provide the best assessment of that child.

Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children (MiAEYC) supports using appropriate assessment with young children to track development and to help the teachers plan for each child's learning.

We believe that:

- Assessment of young children is important to plan for their individual learning and development.
- Staff and families should be knowledgeable about assessment.
- Children are assessed for different purposes, and the type of assessment must fit the purpose.
- Appropriate assessment is used:
 - to help children develop physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually
 - to detect developmental delays or special needs
 - to enhance teaching to improve children's learning
 - as an essential part of program evaluation and improvement
 - to inform parents of progress and concerns
- Assessment is an ongoing and continuous process.
- In high quality programs, adults use information from a variety of sources to plan for and make decisions about individual children.
- Effective assessment instruments and procedures meet technical standards for validity, reliability, and cultural responsiveness, and are used for the purpose for which they were designed.
- Appropriate assessment instruments allow responses typical for the age, gender, cultural background and geographic location of the children in the group.
- Young children must be assessed individually by adults they know in realistic settings and situations that reflect children's actual performance.
- Inappropriate assessment can be harmful to young children.

¹Shonkoff, JP and DA Phillips, Ed. (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Key Points

- Appropriate assessment improves children's learning.
- Effective assessment is more than just a test.
- Good decisions about children consider many sources of information.
- Good teaching is based on good assessment.
- Effective assessment helps teachers make good decisions.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is good assessment?

Good assessment instruments and procedures support children's learning and identify their special needs, help to evaluate programs, and assure that they are accountable for the learning of all children. Assessment instruments are good when they are accurate and useful for their stated purposes and are used to improve teacher's instructional decisions for each child's learning.

What are formal and informal assessments, and what's the difference between assessment and testing?

Both formal and informal methods can be used to collect information to measure the level of performance of a child or group of children. Observation of children during on-going classroom activities is a form of assessment and may be rather informal. Systematic assessment systems allow teachers and administrators to categorize and share information in a more formal way so that conclusions can be drawn about growth and learning. Testing is a very formal form of assessment to measure performance. Formal testing by a trained examiner is often necessary to diagnose some kinds of disabilities or conditions. Formal testing, when used, should be conducted individually by adults known to the child.

How can we determine if schools are helping children learn?

Good early childhood programs use a variety of evaluation strategies to make sure they are effective. Program evaluations should include assessment of children's learning. Schools that follow children's progress through the use of portfolios and observations can often show children's growth over time and are able to share children's accomplishments with their families and the community.

Besides looking at test scores to judge a school, families and community members should consider the expertise of the staff, the school climate, the curriculum offered, and how the school meets the needs of the individual students.

Children's backgrounds, social skills, interests, and prior experiences are important factors in determining whether the school is ready for the children who attend. There are several systems to rate the quality of early childhood programs, including classroom observation systems and accreditation programs.

Why shouldn't we rank children, teachers, schools, and districts based on the children's test scores?

Although the overall achievement of students, as measured by statewide or other standardized tests, can provide an indicator of student learning, it should not be used as the sole factor to rate or rank school buildings or districts or to compare children and teachers. Statewide tests are based on state standards and measure whether students know and can do the items representative of those standards. National tests indicate how students are doing compared to other students who have taken the same test. These assessment instruments do not take into account how much students have learned – only at what level they are currently functioning and the bank of information and skills measured by the particular instrument. They also do not assess social skills, which are critical for success in school. Instruments may be more or less reliable or consistent (will the children score the same way if the assessment is administered on another day?) and more or less valid or accurate (does the assessment really measure what it is intended to measure?).

When is assessment or assessment procedures misused?

- When children are denied services that would help them, such as screening children out of programs for which they are eligible, assessment has been misused.
- When assessment instruments intended for one purpose are used for another purpose, there is misuse. For example, an assessment instrument used to screen children to determine whether they need referrals to more extensive special education assessment should not be used for placement in extra-year programs or for designing instruction. Placements for children, including retention, summer school, and additional services (i.e., extra reading support, special education, programs for gifted and talented, tutoring) should always be based on many pieces of evidence.

Who can assess children?

Ideally, children should be assessed by familiar adults in comfortable surroundings. Many times children who are enrolled in programs can be assessed by their teachers or other program personnel during on-going activities. The assessor should be trained to use the instrument and its procedures. There are high quality professional development options associated with systematic observation methods. If a formal, standardized assessment is indicated, a qualified specialist may be needed. There is a formal referral and evaluation process for special education that may include individualized testing by a school psychologist.

Michigan Stories

These are stories about people in early childhood care and education known to MiAEYC members. The names have been changed.

A four-year-old girl in a pre-K program: Four-year-old Susie had been involved in a pre-K program for four- and five-year-olds for two years. Her teacher, Pat, through observation and using systematic assessment systems, believed Susie was socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically ready for kindergarten. Pat recommended Susie enter the private school's kindergarten classroom in the fall. This particular school required all incoming kindergarteners take a formal, somewhat outdated test. Susie sat in a room with the kindergarten teacher (they were unknown to each other), and attempted to perform on this test. She scored low. This kindergarten teacher had an opportunity to observe Susie in a short-term, unfamiliar play situation as well. The kindergarten teacher recommended holding Susie out for a year. Pat and Susie's mother presented their documentation of Susie's readiness, and the school reluctantly admitted her. Susie did well in her year of kindergarten, and both her parents and pre-K teacher were glad they pushed for her admittance.

A Mother of a two-year-old boy: At two years old, Robbie had a small speaking vocabulary and used gestures and noises to communicate. His comprehension seemed right on target. Robbie's mom, Beth, raised her concern with her pediatrician, and he referred her to Early On. An assessor came to Beth's home and "played" with Robbie, noting on an assessment questionnaire what Robbie could do. She, too, agreed that Robbie had a speech delay. For the next year, a speech therapist visited Robbie and Beth in their home, using toys and games to improve Robbie's speech. Taking note of Robbie's new words and improved communication techniques provided the assessment needed throughout the year to show his progress and to drive the lessons.

Approved: June 30, 2001

Updated: September 17, 2005