

# **Documenting Children's Progress in Head Start and Child Care\***

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Developmental assessment is a process designed to deepen understanding of a child's competencies and resources, and of the care giving and learning environments most likely to help a child make fullest use of his or her developmental potential. Assessment should be an ongoing, collaborative process of systematic observation and analysis (Greenspan & Meisels, 1999). This process involves formulating questions, gathering information, sharing observations, and making interpretations—all key activities and components in a Head Start or child care program.

What are some of the critical issues in the assessment of young children? Assessment is the process of obtaining information for the purpose of making evaluative decisions. The choice of a given assessment tool or approach for Head Start or child care depends on the type of decision that will be required as a result of the assessment. Assessments may be performed in order to: 1) confirm the presence and extent of a disability; 2) determine appropriate remediation; 3) demonstrate the extent of a child's previous accomplishments.

Any specific assessment approach is primarily a sampling process. It consists of a snapshot, or a series of snapshots, of a child's knowledge, skills, abilities, or personality characteristics taken at a particular point in time, from a particular vantage point, and with a particular instrument or recording device. Interpretations of data from assessments should consider both the child's biological status and the impact of environmental factors on the aspect of development assessed. One must look at observational or test data in the context of the child's experience. Is the child being assessed challenged by premature birth or a medical condition, living in poverty, and spending most of his or her waking hours in a poor quality child care setting? Or is the child the product of a healthy, full term delivery, and is

s/he living in an economically secure, two parent household that affords ample opportunity for play and discovery?

Any assessment approach which is intended to identify existing or potential developmental problems in young children and to suggest appropriate interventions that might eliminate or reduce risk factors needs to use a mixed or multi-dimensional measurement strategy that incorporates a wide range of data. Knowledge and an understanding of the cultural context of a young child's care giving environment is essential to understanding the meaning of the child's repertoire of skills, knowledge, and personality characteristics. Assessment approaches that rely on structured tasks or questions in early childhood are marked by recurrent practical problems that contribute to error in determining early childhood capacities (Meisels, 1994).

Assessment should be based on an integrated developmental model—assessment of a young child must take into account the full complexity of the child's development. The following functional areas should be part of this assessment: the child's functional emotional and social capacities; cognitive capacities; and language, motor, and sensory functioning; and constitutional and maturational variations that influence the child's development, as well as the caregiver, family, community, and cultural patterns that influence it.

Assessment involves multiple sources of information and multiple components, such as: the parent's description of the child's capacities in the different areas of development and discussions with the parents to determine their questions and concerns about the child's development; direct observation of the child, including interactions between the child and the caregiver; observations of the family and discussions with them about ways they have found to support the child's development and about family patterns related to the child's development that are of concern to them; and focused observations and/or assessments of specific areas of the child's functioning.

An assessment should follow a certain sequence: establishing an alliance with the parents, listening to their views of the child's strengths and challenges, and discussing the issues to be explored in the assessment; obtaining a developmental history of the child and an initial picture of the family's experience; observing the child in the context of unstructured play with the parent(s) or other familiar caregivers; using a developmental model

as a framework for integrating all the data obtained from parents' reports, direct observation, and other sources, and conveying and discussing assessment findings in the context of an alliance with the child's primary caregivers.

The child's relationship and interactions with his or her most trusted caregiver should form the cornerstone of an assessment. An understanding of sequences and timetables in typical development is essential as a framework for the interpretation of developmental differences among young children. Assessment should emphasize attention to the child's level and pattern of organizing experience and to functional capacities, which represent an integration of emotional and cognitive abilities. The child's level and pattern of organizing experience must be understood within the cultural context of the child and family. The assessment process should identify the child's current competencies and strengths, as well as the competencies, which will constitute developmental progression in a continuous growth model of development. Assessment is a collaborative process between parents and staff. Participation in the process of assessment should be open to everyone who is substantially involved in supporting the development of the child and family. The process of assessment should always be viewed as the first step in a potential intervention process. Reassessment of a child's developmental status should occur in the context of day-to-day family and/or early childhood activities.

There are some practices to avoid in assessment as well: young children should never be challenged during assessment by separation from their parents or familiar caregivers; young children should never be assessed by a strange examiner; assessments that are limited to areas that are easily measurable, such as certain motor or cognitive skills, should not be considered complete; and formal tests or tools should not be the cornerstone of the assessment of a young child.

\* This paper was based upon Greenspan and Meisels chapter "Toward a new vision for the developmental assessment of infants and young children". Paper presented at the Pennsylvania Association Child Care Agencies Annual Conference "Caring for Pennsylvania's Children", October 26, 2000.