Early Childhood Building Blocks

Best Practices in Assessment in Early Childhood Education

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INTRODUCTION

The director of the early childhood program was puzzled. A prospective parent had asked her about the school’s assessment program. The director quickly pulled out the checklist of expectations from the local kindergarten teachers and explained that the school assessed children’s performance on the checklist before they went to kindergarten. The parent said, “Don’t you have anything that has standards?” So the director pulled out the screening instrument that the school used when children were admitted. It had standards. Looking a bit disappointed and trying to clarify her question, the parent asked, “Don’t you have anything that enables you to see if you are meeting your goals with the children?” The teacher pulled out an environmental rating scale. The parent again looked disappointed and finally left. The director thought, “What does she want? These are all assessments.”
RATIONAL

The variety of assessment and program evaluation tools available to early childhood programs can be confusing. The “expectations” checklist noted in the Introduction lacks standardization, and so there is no reliability or validity data to give it credibility. The screening assessment that the director offered helps teachers identify only those children who need additional evaluation or support. And the environmental rating scale is really a program evaluation tool to look at the quality of what is happening in the center. None of these provides what the parent wanted—an individual child assessment system that enables the teachers to determine what each child knows, what each child can do, and what the teacher needs to do to support each child’s growth and development. This article offers guidelines for what a program should have and defines best practices in child assessment.

WHAT IS ASSESSMENT?

Assessment is a tool or process for answering specific questions about various aspects of children’s knowledge, skills, behavior, or personality.

Best practices in assessment require that teachers do more than just observe children and write notes. Anecdotal notes may be a part of an assessment, but there has to be a tool (such as a checklist) or an organizational system for collecting, analyzing, and sharing information.

Best practices in assessment require that the assessment process answer specific questions about each child (for example, “Can this child sort objects?”).

To answer questions like these, teachers have to focus their observations and data gathering on specific knowledge, skills, and behaviors that are expected of a child of that age. These are called widely held expectations (or standards) and are based on accepted research. The expectations (or standards) are used to build a framework that enables the teacher to look at all children’s performance in the same way. Providing a list of knowledge, skills, and behaviors assures that the teacher looks at all areas of development and knowledge for each child.
TYPES OF ASSESSMENT

There are many types of child assessment.

**Developmental screening assessments** are used to identify specific children who should receive further attention. To illustrate the point, imagine an archaeologist screening the soil for artifacts. The archaeologist’s screening tray has mesh on the bottom. She dumps the soil into the tray and shakes it; much of the soil falls through, but some clumps of dirt and pottery pieces remain on top, and these need to be examined closely. This screening process is similar to screening assessments. We can use the assessment tool to look at a large number of children. Those who pass the assessment fall through, but those who do not pass through require that we look at them more closely. We can use screening assessments to determine which of a number of children will benefit from a program, or which might be at risk of having difficulties in school, or which would benefit from a more extensive evaluation of their knowledge, skills, and behavior. Developmental screening instruments used commonly in Ohio include Galileo Preschool, which aligns with the Head Start Outcomes Framework, DECA (Devereux Early Childhood Assessment), Ages & Stages Questionnaires, and Get It Got It Go!

**Diagnostic assessments** include assessments that are used by psychologists or therapists (such as speech and language therapists) or content specialists (such as reading teachers) to determine if there is a delay or disability. Diagnostic assessments used commonly in Ohio include Brigance Preschool Screen II, by Albert H. Brigance, and Fluharty Preschool Speech and Language Screening Test, Nancy Buono Fluharty.

**Readiness assessments** provide information on the specific knowledge or skills that a child needs to learn something new. For example, we might assess a child’s ability to use a computer mouse and follow verbal directions to determine whether the child is ready to use a specific computer reading program. Readiness assessments that you might see in Ohio include Early Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA) and Kindergarten Readiness Assessment—Literacy (KRA-L).

**Achievement assessments** tell us what a child has learned and accomplished. The achievement assessment is the type the parent in the Introduction was hoping to see on her visit. This type of assessment enables the teacher to compare performance with widely held expectations and to plan appropriate next steps for children. Achievement assessments used commonly in Ohio include Work Sampling System, Creative Curriculum, and other agency-developed measures that align to the Ohio Early Learning Content Standards.
AUTHENTIC PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT VERSUS ON-DEMAND ASSESSMENT

Best practices for assessment of young children include the use of authentic performance assessment. That is, one of the best ways to assess young children is to observe them while they are doing typical tasks during the regular school day (*authentic performance*). Young children do not understand the purposes or importance of assessments, and so they are unlikely to perform at their best if they are interrupted in the middle of a game or playtime to do a specific task (*on-demand performance*). We can gather data for an authentic performance assessment by collecting children’s work or systematically observing children’s performance. For example, we might observe children while they are playing with other children, completing puzzles, building in the block corner, or listening to stories. Examples of products or children’s work we might collect include art work, pretend or invented spelling during play, sign-in sheets, or photographs of block structures.

DOCUMENTING FOR ASSESSMENT

To assess a child’s knowledge, skills, and behaviors, we must document what we see (collect evidence). On the basis of the evidence, we know that conclusions about the child are valid. We can also share this evidence with others, such as parents. Notes, portfolios, and checklists are all documentation methods that are frequently used by Ohio’s teachers, and these can be “real” documents, created using paper and pen, or they can be created and stored in any of the wondrous electronic devices that are available.

ISSUES OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

One of the biggest concerns of parents and educators is the need for assessment to be reliable and valid. Reliability refers to how reliable—or consistent—judgments made from the assessment will be. An assessment system has high reliability when the process and the assessment instrument have been tested through multiple applications and redesigned until users can be reasonably sure that all teachers using the system would score all children in nearly the same way.
When an assessment process or tool has validity, users can be assured that it measures what it says it will measure and not something else. For example, an assessment checklist item that assesses the ability to sort objects would have high validity if it required a child to sort objects into groups to show evidence of sorting skills rather than to explain how to sort objects. It is possible that a child may not yet have developed a high enough level of language ability to explain why, but is able to sort when asked to. To assume the child cannot sort because he or she cannot explain how to sort means the assessment item lacks validity. Reliability and validity scores are generally located in the assessment manual that accompanies the assessment tool.

The documentation methods used for the assessment system also affect how reliable and valid an assessment system is. In Figure 1 below, the different methods of collecting evidence are placed on a continuum, with the most reliable and valid data on the right side — indicating that judgments using the assessment tool or system utilize valid and reliable checklists and other measures such as portfolios.

Figure 1. Continuum of best practices: Assessment decisions. [© Judy Harris Helm, Ed.D., Best Practices, Inc.]

When data are aggregated, such as adding the performance of children in multiple classrooms together to determine average performance, it is especially important that all teachers are rating children’s performance the same way. When you need to aggregate data, it is best practice to only use data that come from instruments with established reliability and validity.
CHOOSING AN ASSESSMENT SYSTEM FOR YOUR PROGRAM

Best practices in assessment require that the assessment tool or system that you use be compatible with your curriculum goals and objectives, your style of teaching, the needs of your families, and the time available for preparation, collection, and reflection. An assessment tool or system that is incompatible—no matter how good it seems—will fail to inform teaching, can become burdensome and overwhelming for staff, will focus on different goals and objectives (incompatible with those of your program), and can hinder or prohibit the type of teaching desired.

So when looking at compatibility of assessment tools or systems, consider the role that assessment will take in your program:

- **Who will use** the assessment data?
- **How formal** does the assessment data need to be?
- **How much** information do parents really want?
- **How much** information do school and community leaders want?
- **What is required** for your funding agencies or organizations?

Once you have a clear understanding of the role of assessment in your unique program, you can take the following steps to design or select a system:

1. **Define the knowledge, skills, and dispositions (attitudes toward learning) that you want to foster in your program.** These may be specified by your funding agency. If not, the Ohio Early Learning Content Standards should serve you well.

2. **Think how children will learn** the knowledge, skills, and attitudes through the opportunities you create by providing an enriched environment and learning experiences, with interesting and challenging materials and plenty of time for learning.

3. **Consider how much time and effort** you need to devote to the assessment and reporting process.
An Appropriate Developmental Sequence

Observations and developmental checklists. Most early childhood assessments rely on observations and developmental checklists to focus observations, summarize and interpret collected observations, provide valid criteria for evaluation, and support curriculum and instruction.

Background information about the checklists. Good systems also provide some background information to the teachers to be sure that they are marking the items correctly. The best checklists and systems also offer guidance on when to collect data and mark items. These tasks should be done throughout the year and not just at the year's end.

Portfolios. In addition, good assessment plans include keeping some kind of portfolio of children's work which documents the quality of each child's performance. For example, "writing your name" can be checked off on a checklist; however, there is wide variation in how children write their names. This can best be captured as a writing sample in a portfolio.

Communication with parents or other significant family members. Best practices in assessment also require some form of regular communication with parents (or other guardians) which provides honest information on a child's knowledge, skills, and behavior.

Training and support. Any assessment system selected for a program will require initial training and ongoing support for implementation.

Integration with Classroom Teaching

Good assessment must be integrated with good teaching. This is often called alignment of curriculum and assessment. Choosing an appropriate assessment tool or system that matches your curriculum goals and objectives, experiences, activities, and materials is important but not sufficient to assure alignment. Sometimes teachers misinterpret the use of the standards or widely held expectations by taking each item and teaching it directly. Best practices in assessment recognize that the items on the checklist are indicators of a child's accomplishment of goals and not a list of activities for the teacher to do. Instead the items on the checklist are the result of the experiences and teaching that occur in the classroom.
For example, a teacher might have a goal to expand children’s desire to learn to read. The assessment must be based on evidence of the child’s expanding desire to read, not on the experiences that the teacher provided. The continuum in Figure 2 shows best practices of the role of assessment in curriculum planning and teaching in an early childhood classroom.

Figure 2. Continuum of best practices: The role of assessment in curriculum planning. © Judy Harris Helm, Ed.D., Best Practices, Inc.

In the end, it is the use of the assessment data that results in the highest-quality early childhood experience for each child and makes assessment worth doing.
Section 1: All Children Are Born Ready to Learn

Outcome 1: Programs support the health and well-being of young children.

Goal 1: Health and developmental screenings of all children occur within 60 days of each child’s entrance into the program.

Indicator B: All children enrolled in the program receive language and age-appropriate, standardized developmental screenings, which at a minimum address speech/language, cognitive, gross/fine motor and social/emotional/behavioral development, using instruments with normative scores relevant to the population.

Section 2: Environments Matter

Outcome 1: The learning environment supports young children’s thinking abilities, learning processes, social competencies and development.

Goal 3: Assessments are selected and used to make, adjust and refine instructional decisions and to evaluate child progress.

Indicator A: Educators conduct and participate in the required assessments, including Get It Got It Go (GGG) and the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO).

Indicator B: Educators use a curriculum-based assessment process that includes multiple strategies and that is linguistically, age and developmentally appropriate.

Indicator C: Educators regularly use assessment data to design learning experiences, plan curriculum, monitor progress, select materials and adjust instructional practices to support learning.
REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Harris Helm, Ed. D., began her career teaching first grade. She then taught four-year-olds, directed and designed early childhood programs, and taught in teacher training programs. For over ten years, she has been assisting early childhood and elementary schools in integrating research and new methods through her consulting and training company, Best Practices, Inc. Dr. Helm is the author of several texts, including *Windows on Learning: Documenting Young Children’s Work*, *Young Investigators: The Project Approach in the Early Years*, *The Power of Projects: Meeting Contemporary Challenges in Early Childhood Classrooms*, *Teaching Your Child to Love Learning: A Guide to Projects at Home*, *Teaching Parents to Do Projects at Home: A Tool Kit for Parent Educators*, and *Building Support for Your School: Using Children’s Work to Show Learning*.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Nancy Brannon at nbrannon@ohiorc.org or Nicole Luthy at nluthy@ohiorc.org. Visit [http://rec.ohiorc.org](http://rec.ohiorc.org) to see the REC website. Also see other *Early Childhood Building Blocks*.  

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