

The Importance of Assessment in Early Childhood

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Article Summary

Assessment is essential in early childhood education because educators need reliable information about each child's development, learning, strengths, interests, and support needs. The original article connects assessment with early intervention, accountability, program quality, and the identification of children who may need additional services. Those purposes remain important, but assessment should not be treated as a single standardized test administered to young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children describes observation, documentation, and assessment as ongoing processes that help educators plan, implement, and evaluate learning experiences. Effective assessment is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive and uses several sources of information. A young child may demonstrate knowledge differently during play, conversation, a familiar routine, or a formal task. High-stakes decisions should never depend on one score.

Why Early Childhood Assessment Matters

Development from birth through age eight is rapid and uneven. Children can make substantial changes in language, movement, social interaction, self-regulation, and reasoning within short periods. Assessment helps teachers notice these changes and design experiences that are neither too easy nor too difficult. It also helps families and professionals identify concerns early enough to provide support. The purpose should be to improve learning and well-being, not to rank young children publicly or predict their entire future.

Assessment and Intervention

The original article correctly states that assessment and intervention are linked. Assessment identifies a starting point and provides information about whether an intervention is working. If a teacher introduces visual supports for classroom transitions, for example, observations can show whether distress decreases and independence increases. If the child does not improve, the team should reconsider the strategy, implementation, or explanation rather than blame the child. Intervention without assessment can become guesswork, while assessment without action becomes paperwork.

Screening

Screening is a brief process used to identify children who may need closer evaluation. Developmental, hearing, vision, language, and social-emotional screening can help detect possible concerns. A screening result does not establish a diagnosis or special-education eligibility. Screeners are designed to be efficient and may produce false positives or miss difficulties that appear only in certain settings. Results should be discussed with families and followed by appropriate monitoring or comprehensive evaluation when indicated.

Diagnostic and Eligibility Evaluation

A comprehensive evaluation is more detailed than screening and answers a specific question about development, disability, or educational need. Under the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#), evaluation must use multiple tools and strategies and cannot rely on a single measure as the sole basis for determining eligibility. Qualified professionals may assess cognition, communication, motor development, adaptive behavior, social-emotional functioning, hearing, vision, and learning. The process should identify needs and strengths, not merely assign a category.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment occurs during learning and informs the next teaching decision. A teacher may observe how a child counts objects, retells a story, joins play, holds a pencil, or solves a conflict. The observation can guide a prompt, material, grouping, or future activity. Formative assessment is often embedded in daily routines and therefore less disruptive than formal testing. Its value depends on intentional documentation. Memory alone can favor dramatic events and overlook gradual progress.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment describes achievement at the end of a period or program. It may be used for reporting, transition planning, or program evaluation. With young children, summative conclusions should still draw from multiple observations and samples rather than one test day. Development is variable, and fatigue, illness, unfamiliar adults, or language differences can affect performance. A final rating should communicate what the child can do and the context in which support remains needed.

Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment evaluates children during meaningful activities in familiar environments. Teachers may collect observations, photographs, recordings, conversations, work samples, and family reports. A child's ability to negotiate roles during play or persist with a construction task can reveal competencies that a standardized item misses. Authentic assessment is not automatically subjective or informal. It requires clear goals, consistent criteria, ethical documentation, and review over time.

Observation

Observation is one of the most important early-childhood methods. Educators should record what they see and hear rather than begin with interpretation. "Maya placed five blocks in a row and counted one through five" is more useful than "Maya is good at math." Objective notes can later be analyzed for patterns. Observations should occur across activities, times, peers, and adults so one unusual event does not define the child.

Documentation

Documentation makes learning visible and supports reflection. A portfolio can include drawings, writing attempts, photographs of projects, teacher notes, and child explanations. The educator should select evidence connected with learning goals rather than keep everything. Digital documentation requires privacy safeguards and family consent. Images should not be posted publicly simply because they are educational. Children's dignity and confidentiality remain important.

Work Sampling

Work samples show what children produce over time. A series of drawings can reveal increasing detail and control, while writing samples can show development from marks to letters and words. The educator should consider whether the work was independent, prompted, copied, or completed with peers. A polished product created through heavy adult assistance may reveal less than an imperfect independent attempt. Notes about context make the sample interpretable.

Rating Scales and Checklists

Rating scales and checklists can organize observation across skills or behaviors. They are efficient but can oversimplify development. A box marked "not yet" does not explain whether the child lacks opportunity, misunderstands language, feels anxious, or performs the skill elsewhere. Ratings should be supported by examples and reviewed with awareness of bias. Different observers may interpret

categories differently, making training and calibration necessary.

Standardized Tests

Standardized tests use consistent administration and scoring and compare performance with established criteria or norms. They can provide valuable information when the measure is reliable, valid for the intended purpose, and appropriate for the child's age, language, culture, and disability. The original article notes that standardized testing permits comparison with normative samples. It should also emphasize limitations. A norm group may not represent the child, and a score is an estimate affected by measurement error and testing conditions.

Norm-Referenced and Criterion-Referenced Measures

Norm-referenced measures compare a child with a reference group. Criterion-referenced measures evaluate performance against defined skills or learning goals. The two answer different questions. A percentile does not indicate the percentage of items answered correctly; it indicates relative standing in the norm group. A criterion score can show mastery of specific content without explaining how unusual the performance is compared with peers. Educators should select the measure according to the decision they need to make.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability concerns score consistency, while validity concerns whether evidence supports a particular interpretation and use. A test can produce consistent scores yet be inappropriate for deciding kindergarten readiness. Validity is not a general stamp attached permanently to an instrument. It depends on purpose and population. Teachers and administrators should review manuals and seek qualified guidance rather than choose a test because it is popular or easy to purchase.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practice framework asks educators to consider common patterns of child development, individual characteristics, and the social, cultural, linguistic, and historical context. Assessment should fit these same considerations. Young children learn through play, movement, relationships, exploration, and conversation. An assessment system focused only on seated academic tasks provides an incomplete picture. Methods should allow children to demonstrate learning through multiple forms.

Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural expectations shape communication, play, eye contact, independence, storytelling, adult-child interaction, and the meaning of behavior. Educators should avoid treating difference as deficiency. Family members can explain routines, languages, values, and prior opportunities. Cultural responsiveness does not mean lowering expectations according to stereotypes. It means interpreting performance within context and ensuring that the assessment asks a fair question.

Language and Multilingual Children

Multilingual children may understand concepts they cannot yet express in the language of assessment. Testing only in English can confuse language acquisition with developmental delay. Educators should gather information across the child's languages and use qualified interpreters or bilingual professionals when possible. Family translation by a sibling is not appropriate for formal evaluation. Reports should state the language used and explain limitations.

Children With Disabilities

Assessment should be accessible to children with sensory, motor, communication, or other disabilities. An accommodation should remove a barrier unrelated to the skill being measured. For example, a child may respond through an augmentative communication device when the goal is conceptual understanding. If the test measures spoken articulation, the same accommodation would change the construct. Professionals should document adaptations and avoid comparing nonstandard administration with norms as though conditions were identical.

Family Participation

Families know the child across routines and history that teachers do not observe. They can describe language, health, sleep, interests, relationships, and behavior at home and in the community. Assessment should be reciprocal: educators share observations and families contribute interpretation. Meetings should use understandable language and avoid presenting scores as unquestionable verdicts. Families need opportunities to disagree, ask questions, and receive copies of relevant information.

Child Participation

Young children can participate in assessment by selecting work, explaining a drawing, setting a goal, or reflecting on what was difficult. Their voice helps educators understand intention and interest.

Participation should be age-appropriate and should not create pressure to evaluate themselves against peers. A portfolio conversation can strengthen agency by showing that assessment is part of learning rather than something done secretly to the child.

School Readiness

Readiness should not be treated as a test a child passes before deserving access to school. It involves the child, family, school, and community. Schools must be ready to support diverse learners.

Academic, physical, social-emotional, language, and self-regulation development all matter, but no brief test captures them completely. Readiness information should guide transition and support rather than exclude children from opportunity.

Social-Emotional Assessment

Young children communicate distress through behavior as well as words. Social-emotional assessment may examine relationships, emotion regulation, play, attention, anxiety, and behavior. Context is essential. A child may withdraw in an unfamiliar classroom but interact actively at home. Trauma, sleep, language, sensory needs, and developmental differences can affect behavior. Screening should lead to support and careful evaluation, not stigmatizing labels.

Assessment and Curriculum

Assessment should inform curriculum planning. If children understand counting but struggle to compare quantities, the teacher can create games involving more, less, and equal. If observations show limited participation in group storytelling, the teacher can use smaller groups, visual supports, or culturally familiar stories. Curriculum should not become endless test preparation. Assessment is useful when it expands responsive teaching rather than narrowing learning.

Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring uses repeated measures to examine whether a child is responding to instruction or intervention. The measure should be sensitive to change and feasible to administer consistently. Data can help teams decide whether to continue, intensify, modify, or end support. A graph can reveal a trend, but it should be interpreted with qualitative observations. Growth can occur in meaningful ways not captured by the selected measure.

Program Evaluation

Programs use aggregated assessment data to evaluate curriculum, access, quality, and outcomes. Child-level measures should not be used automatically to rank teachers or programs because enrollment, resources, disability, language, and community conditions differ. Program evaluation should combine child outcomes with classroom quality, family experience, staff conditions, and implementation. Data must be interpreted at the level for which they were designed.

Accountability

The original article notes that assessment can hold districts and programs accountable. Accountability is useful when it identifies whether promised services are delivered and whether groups receive equitable opportunity. It becomes harmful when high-stakes consequences pressure educators to teach narrowly, exclude children, or manipulate data. Accountability systems should include safeguards against invalid comparisons and should provide resources for improvement rather than only punishment.

Bias in Assessment

Implicit and explicit bias can influence which children are referred, how behavior is rated, and how ambiguous evidence is interpreted. Educators may view assertiveness differently according to race, gender, disability, or language. Teams should review patterns, use multiple observers, and ask whether the same behavior would be judged similarly in another child. Bias training alone is insufficient; structured criteria and data review are needed.

Ethical Use of Data

Assessment information is sensitive. Programs should collect only what they need, explain the purpose, secure records, limit access, and follow applicable privacy law. Children should not be described permanently through a score obtained at age four. Reports should use respectful language and emphasize that development changes. Data should never be sold or reused for unrelated purposes without appropriate authorization.

Choosing an Assessment

Before selecting a tool, educators should ask: What decision will this information support? Is the measure designed for this age, purpose, language, culture, and setting? What training is required? How reliable and valid are the scores? What will happen after a concern is identified? An inexpensive

test is not useful if the program lacks capacity for follow-up. The assessment plan should begin with the child's educational need, not the tool available.

A Balanced Assessment System

A strong system combines daily observation, work samples, family information, formative assessment, appropriate screening, and specialized evaluation when needed. No method should dominate every decision. Authentic evidence provides context, while standardized evidence can support comparison under controlled conditions. Together they create a fuller picture. The system should be reviewed regularly to remove assessments that consume time without improving teaching or support.

Conclusion

Assessment is vital in early childhood because it connects observation with intentional teaching, early intervention, family partnership, and program improvement. Its value depends on purpose and method. Young children should be assessed through ongoing, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive processes using several sources of evidence. Screening identifies possible risk but does not diagnose. Standardized tests can contribute when their reliability, validity, norms, and limitations fit the decision. Authentic assessment, observation, documentation, and work sampling show learning in meaningful contexts. The ultimate test of an assessment system is not how much data it collects. It is whether the information helps adults create more equitable, joyful, and effective opportunities for each child.

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