Why is Assessment Important?

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Assessment is important because of all the decisions you will make about children when teaching and caring for them. The decisions facing our three teachers at the beginning of this chapter all involve how best to educate children. Like them, you will be called upon every day to make decisions before, during, and after your teaching. Whereas some of these decisions will seem small and inconsequential, others will be "high stakes," influencing the life course of children. All of your assessment decisions taken as a whole will direct and alter children's learning outcomes. Below outlines for you some purposes of assessment and how assessment can enhance your teaching and student learning. All of these purposes are important; if you use assessment procedures appropriately, you will help all children learn well.

The following general principles should guide both policies and practices for the assessment of young children:

- Assessment should bring about benefits for children. Gathering accurate information from young children is difficult and potentially stressful. Assessments must have a clear benefit—either in direct services to the child or in improved quality of educational programs.

- Assessment should be tailored to a specific purpose and should be reliable, valid, and fair for that purpose. Assessments designed for one purpose are not necessarily valid if used for other purposes. In the past, many of the abuses of testing with young children have occurred because of misuse.

- Assessment policies should be designed recognizing that reliability and validity of assessments increase with children's age. The younger the child, the more difficult it is to obtain reliable and valid assessment data. It is particularly difficult to assess children's cognitive abilities accurately before age six. Because of problems with reliability and validity, some types of assessment should be postponed until children are older, while other types of assessment can be pursued, but only with necessary safeguards.

- Assessment should be age appropriate in both content and the method of data collection. Assessments of young children should address the full range of early learning and development, including physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language development; and cognition and general knowledge. Methods of assessment should recognize that children need familiar contexts to be able to demonstrate their abilities. Abstract paper-and-pencil tasks may make it especially difficult for young children to show what they know.
• Assessment should be linguistically appropriate, recognizing that to some extent all assessments are measures of language. Regardless of whether an assessment is intended to measure early reading skills, knowledge of color names, or learning potential, assessment results are easily confounded by language proficiency, especially for children who come from home backgrounds with limited exposure to English, for whom the assessment would essentially be an assessment of their English proficiency. Each child’s first- and second-language development should be taken into account when determining appropriate assessment methods and in interpreting the meaning of assessment results.

• Parents should be a valued source of assessment information, as well as an audience for assessment. Because of the fallibility of direct measures of young children, assessments should include multiple sources of evidence, especially reports from parents and teachers. Assessment results should be shared with parents as part of an ongoing process that involves parents in their child’s education.4

**Purposes of Assessment**

**Children**

• Identify what children know
• Identify children’s special needs
• Determine appropriate placement
• Select appropriate curricula to meet children’s individual needs
• Refer children and, as appropriate, their families for additional services to programs and agencies

**Families**

• Communicate with parents to provide information about their children’s progress and learning
• Relate school activities to home activities and experiences

**Early Childhood Programs**

• Make policy decisions regarding what is and is not appropriate for children
• Determine how well and to what extent programs and services children receive are beneficial and appropriate

**Early Childhood Teachers**

• Identify children's skills, abilities, and needs
• Make lesson and activity plans and set goals
• Create new classroom arrangements
• Select materials
• Make decisions about how to implement learning activities
• Report to parents and families about children’s developmental status and achievement
• Monitor and improve the teaching-learning process
• Meet the individual needs of children
• Group for instruction

The Public

• Inform the public regarding children’s achievement
• Provide information relating to student’s school-wide achievements
• Provide a basis for public policy (e.g., legislation, recommendations, and statements)

Notes


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