

EARLY CHILDHOOD SCREENING & ASSESSMENT IN CONNECTICUT

The assessment of young children’s skills and behaviors is an important part of intentionally supporting learning and development. Assessment helps us understand children’s strengths and areas for growth, plan supports and services, and communicate with other professionals and families. Choosing appropriate screening and assessment processes and tools, and putting in place the support necessary for implementation, ensures that the information collected is accurate, relevant, and useful.

This document is designed to clarify language around types of assessment, and to serve as a resource for those making decisions about or engaging in assessment with young children and their families.

Observing, documenting and assessing each child’s development and learning are essential processes for educators and programs to plan, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of the experiences they provide to children.
NAEYC (2020)

Key Considerations for Assessment in Early Childhood

The following considerations are helpful when making decisions about which assessments to use in early childhood programs and/or schools.

What is the purpose for assessment?

There are many different purposes for assessing young children. Epstein, et al. (2004) write about four purposes for early childhood assessment:

- ▶ Identify children who may be in need of specialized services, such as special education or mental health services
- ▶ Plan instruction and monitor progress for individuals and groups of children
- ▶ Identify program improvement and staff development needs
- ▶ Evaluate how well a program is meeting goals for children

Administrators, teachers, and families should understand the purpose for all assessments prior to selecting and/or using the tool. It is critical that there is evidence of validity supporting the use of an assessment for the intended purpose.

First consider why you want to collect information about children’s learning and development, and then find the right tool(s) for the job.

What are the benefits and “costs” of this assessment?

It is important to consider how the use of any assessment tool or process will benefit children and families. All assessment processes provide an opportunity to engage and support families with their questions and concerns related to child development, learning, and behavior. Other potential benefits are often connected to the purpose of the assessment, but there may be other benefits, such as a child getting to engage in developmentally appropriate activities with a teacher or family members. Decision-makers must also consider any “costs”, or potential negative impacts, on children, families, programs, or teachers.

These impacts might include financial costs for the program; teacher time commitments necessary to conduct the assessment and/or analyze results; activities or expectations for young children that are not developmentally appropriate; and/or results being shared in ways that might overwhelm or confuse families. Assessments selected for use should enhance and not take away from teaching, and should not prove overly stressful for children or families.

Finally, programs must have a clear plan for the implementation of all assessments that includes training; ongoing support; and time for teachers and administrators to effectively implement the tools and partner with families.

How is information collected?

Young children are best able to show their skills when they are in nurturing and responsive environments; their physical and emotional needs are met; and they are actively engaged in activities relevant to their community, culture, and interests. Young children cannot consistently respond to adult prompts, and their ability to apply skills may depend upon the setting and situation; therefore, great caution should be used when assessing young children outside of their natural context (e.g., asking them to perform discrete tasks with unfamiliar adults). As children mature, they are better able to understand and respond to adult requests and more formal assessment procedures may begin to yield valuable information; however, it is always important to consider the match between how the information is collected and how the resulting data is used.

Authentic Assessments involve programs collecting information in naturally occurring situations. This might involve teachers observing skills in natural contexts or presenting tasks that are like those that occur in the real world. This type of assessment requires children to apply important skills. Authentic approaches to assessment tend to yield rich information, but require time to gather, organize, and reflect upon the information collected. Examples include:

- ▶ A teacher observes a child playing in the block area of a preschool classroom trying several different approaches to stabilize a block structure and documents exactly what he observed.
- ▶ A toddler teacher puts out stacking and nesting blocks of varying sizes and colors. She observes how the children explore the objects and documents cognitive skills, such as engagement in learning, and noticing similarities and differences in objects.
- ▶ A home visitor observes a child with their caregiver and records the skills the child shows during mealtime.

Key Considerations for Assessment in Early Childhood

- What is the purpose for assessment?
- What are the benefits and “costs” of this assessment?
- How is information collected?
- What is assessed?
- How is the information interpreted or scored?
- What does the assessment process involve?
- What is the evidence of validity and reliability?

Standardized Assessments involve programs collecting information in a uniform manner, typically consisting of specific processes and criteria for administering and scoring items. Standardized approaches to assessment provide data that can be used to consider groups of children or compare one child’s performance to established norms (see *How is the information interpreted or scored?*). Most standardized assessments do not provide information that is useful for planning instruction for individual children. Examples of developmentally appropriate uses of assessments involving standardized data collection include:

- ▶ An evaluation team from a local school district uses a standardized tool as a part of the comprehensive assessment plan. The team (which includes the family) discusses information from the standardized tool in conjunction with observational data from the child’s preschool teacher and other assessment. All of this information is used to develop an individualized education program, and to create meaningful and relevant goals for the child’s learning and development.
- ▶ A preschool program uses an instructional screening tool focused on literacy skills to gain information about knowledge of early literacy concepts and skills, and to gain a sense of skills for individual children and across classrooms. Teachers use the information about the class to plan rich and engaging early literacy experiences that are developmentally appropriate (e.g., signing one’s name upon arrival, writing menus in the dramatic play area, finding labels for objects in the context of an activity). They also use that information to develop strategies to support individual children (e.g., a child who cannot write their name yet uses a model, traces their name, or writes just the first letter of their name upon arrival). Administrators periodically review the data with teachers to ensure that the curriculum is meeting the needs of most children in the classroom. Ongoing observations occur to supplement the information from the screening.

Family or Caregiver Input, as well as input from other early childhood teachers, should be a part of every assessment process. These individuals know children well, and have valuable information about their learning and development. Some assessment tools or processes involve the use of specific checklists or questionnaires that are completed by families or caregivers. There are a wide variety of checklists and questionnaires available for different purposes. Tools that rely on caregivers’ input range from informal local documents to formal, standardized tools. These tools may involve responses based on authentic interactions or may involve specific tasks for the child to complete with the familiar adult.

Examples include:

- ▶ A home visitor supports a family to complete the Ages and Stages Questionnaire in order to screen for any potential delays or concerns.
- ▶ An early care and education program provides families with an intake form with questions about their child’s learning and development, as well as questions about the child’s interests and family’s culture.
- ▶ A program using the Connecticut Documentation and Observation for Teaching System (CT DOTS) asks for family input on 1-2 questions each week as a part of their ongoing data collection process.

“Young children have, in varying degrees, developmental limitations on several important (and often unrecognized) dimensions that can affect assessment.”
“In assessment situations, therefore, young children often have difficulty attending to verbal instructions, situational clues, or other instructions and stimuli.”
National Research Council (2000, p. 237)

What is assessed?

It is important to consider children's development across areas of learning and development; however, the focus for the assessment might vary depending upon the purpose of the assessment.

- ▶ If the purpose of the assessment is to screen for potential developmental delays, it may be appropriate to select a tool that focuses primarily on the major developmental domains (social and emotional, language, cognitive, and physical development).
- ▶ When conducting an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services, the assessment plan must be comprehensive and address all areas of concern.
- ▶ When assessing children for the purpose of planning curriculum and instruction, and/or setting educational goals, it may also be important to consider learning and development in one or more content areas such as literacy, mathematics, scientific inquiry, the creative arts, and social studies.

It is also critical to consider the cultural and linguistic relevance of the skills assessed and any specific items or tasks included in the assessment. Children should have the opportunity to exhibit skills in their preferred or primary mode of communication and items should be relevant and meaningful to the community and cultures of the children and families served.

How is the information interpreted or scored?

Young children's development is uneven, which means that they may display different skills depending upon the area of development, time of day, and situation. In addition, children's skills across various areas of development are connected (e.g., language development is related to the development of social skills). Because of the complex nature of early childhood development, it is important to consider how results are interpreted or scored when making decisions about what assessments to use and how the data will be used. Some tools compare children's performance against a specific set of criteria, while others compare their skills to those displayed by children in a normative sample. Tools might provide standard scores, developmental equivalencies, or generate broad categories based upon whether or not there is a need for further assessment. **Those making decisions and those sharing data from any assessment should fully understand how the information is interpreted, and the limitations of what the data tells you about the child's learning and development.**

Criterion-based interpretation focuses on how children's skills compare to a specific set of skills or criteria. Criteria may be based upon developmental norms, early learning standards, skills addressed in a specific curriculum, or other sets of skills identified by those who developed the assessment. Assessments that involve criterion-based interpretation may be referred to as standards-based or curriculum-based assessment.

- ▶ An early care and education program uses the Connecticut Documentation and Observation for Teaching System (CT DOTS) to document how children are progressing relative to the state's early learning and development standards.
- ▶ Teachers use a checklist to document children's progress on the specific goals within the curriculum they are implementing in their program.

Norm-referenced interpretation involves comparing a child's performance to the performance of other students, generally relying upon internally collected data; state or national data; or a normative sample that was used to generate standard scores, cut scores, or age equivalencies.

- ▶ A school district early childhood evaluation team considers how a child scores on an assessment compared to normative data in order to determine eligibility for preschool special education services.
- ▶ A home visitor compares a family's responses on an Ages and Stages Questionnaire aligned to the child's chronological age with the norm-referenced scoring guide to determine if further evaluation or ongoing monitoring are appropriate.

What does the assessment process involve?

Assessment is a multi-step process. It is critical that teachers, families, and administrators understand the full process, including how information about children's skills is gathered and interpreted; how this information is used; how results are communicated; and what information will be used to make decisions. Administrators must ensure that necessary supports are in place to ensure that the entire process takes place as intended (e.g., there is time for teachers to review and reflect upon data; there is a process for gathering family input and informing families about the process). As stated in the 2020 Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement, programs need a system "in place to collect, make sense of, and use observations, documentation, and assessment information to guide what goes on in the early learning setting" (NAEYC, 2020).

Formative Assessment Process

A formative assessment process is ongoing, and is designed to provide information that is useful in planning and adjusting curriculum and instruction. The formative assessment process takes place as a part of the learning environment and provides immediate information to inform a teacher's actions. Information is often gathered through observations of children during daily routines, open-choice periods, and/or during guided play. Providers may also gather information during learning experiences planned to gather information about particular skills.

Summative Assessment

A summative assessment process considers children's progress over a period of time. In older grades, this period of time may be a unit of study with specific learning goals and an assessment of learning at the end of the unit of study may be appropriate. For children between birth to five and in the early elementary years, progress and learning goals are not typically encompassed within a particular unit of study. The skills outlined in early learning and development standards instead lend themselves to a periodic summary of progress. In this case, summarizing the information gathered through the formative assessment process can provide valuable information to share with families, inform curriculum decisions, and help in planning program improvement efforts.

Developmental Surveillance

Developmental surveillance is a process for considering a child's development relative to important milestones in order to monitor the potential need for further evaluation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (n.d.) defines the use of Developmental Monitoring and Developmental Screening, both of which may play a role in a process of developmental surveillance. It is important to note that developmental surveillance is a process that always involves families as full partners, and may be guided by medical professionals, educators, home visitors, and/or social service providers. In educational settings, an Instructional Screening process may also occur and should be clearly distinguished from the use of developmental monitoring or screening.

- ▶ **Developmental Monitoring** involves considering how a child "grows and changes over time and whether [the] child meets the typical developmental milestones in playing, learning, speaking, behaving and moving" (CDC, n.d.). For example, developmental monitoring might include ongoing review of curriculum-based assessments following the use of a formal developmental screening or ongoing use of the CDC's Developmental Milestone Checklists.
- ▶ **Developmental Screening** involves the use of formal tools based on research that can indicate whether there is a need for further evaluation to determine if a child has a delay or disability and would benefit from additional services or supports. For example, a home visitor might support families to complete the Ages and Stages Questionnaire.

Instructional Screening

Instructional screening compares a child’s performance to instructional goals or objectives, often considers the trajectory of learning over time, and may prompt interventions to ensure that children are able to participate in the general curriculum in meaningful ways. Instructional screening might also be used as a part of a progress monitoring process. Because young children’s learning and development is uneven and because young children do not have the same early learning experiences, variation in their access to early learning experiences must be considered when engaging in instructional screening processes.

Diagnostic Assessment and/or Developmental Evaluations

Diagnostic assessment and developmental evaluations are processes that involve professionals using a variety of methods to determine whether a child may have a specific condition and/or may benefit from services designed to meet their individual needs (e.g., special education services). A diagnostic assessment or developmental evaluation may involve the fields of education, medicine, nutrition, and/or psychology. These processes should be tailored to the specific concerns for each child, and family and professionals with the appropriate expertise should be involved in the process.

What is the evidence of validity and reliability?

“Assessments are used only for the populations and purposes for which they have been demonstrated to produce reliable, valid information” (NAEYC, 2021, pg. 20). Programs or teachers selecting tools for use with children and families must review evidence of validity for the intended purpose of an assessment and for use with populations served. Such evidence may be found in a technical manual or may be posted on a website as research on a specific assessment tool. If evidence of validity for the use of the tool with a specific population does not exist, the limitations of the findings must be thoroughly considered. Simply translating materials is not sufficient to address cultural and linguistic relevance. Programs should have plans for partnering with families to address issues of cultural and linguistic relevance, and to gather supplemental information to aid in goal-setting and decision-making.

For some purposes, such as accountability, evidence of reliability is an important consideration (e.g., reliability between uses of the same tool with the same child or reliability across different people using the same tool). For more authentic approaches to assessment designed to inform curriculum and instruction, reliability may be less of a concern because data collection and modifications to curriculum and instruction occur on an ongoing basis.

“Before an assessment instrument or test is used for the purpose of making decisions about children, it is necessary to have evidence showing that the assessment does what it claims to do, namely, that it accurately measures a characteristic or construct. The evidence that is gathered to support the use of an assessment is referred to as validity evidence. A special kind of validity evidence relates to the consistency of the assessment - this may be consistency over repeated assessment or different versions or forms of the assessment. This is termed reliability evidence.”

National Research Council (2008, p. 182)

Assessment Practices Supported by OEC

Evaluation and Assessment in Birth to Three and Preschool Special Education Requirements Under IDEA

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) includes specific requirements related to child find, evaluation, and assessment across Part C (Birth to Three) and Part B, Section 619 (preschool special education). Part C includes specific definitions of evaluation and assessment that align with the information in this document [34 CFR 303.321 (a)(2)].



Evaluation is defined as the "procedures used by appropriate qualified personnel to determine a child's initial and continuing eligibility, consistent with the state definition of infants and toddlers with disabilities."



Assessment is defined as "the ongoing procedures used by qualified personnel to identify the child's unique strengths and needs and the services appropriate to meet those needs and includes the assessment of the child and the assessment of the child's family."

In Connecticut, families are only eligible for Birth to Three when their child:

- ▶ has a diagnosed condition with a high likelihood of resulting in a developmental delay; or
- ▶ as a result of an evaluation is found to be 2 standard deviations below the mean in at least one area or 1.5 standard deviations below the mean in more than one area.

Birth to Three programs use an authentic, curriculum-based assessment to track progress with families of eligible children. Examples include the Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP) or the Carolina Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs. Please see the following for more information about assessment in Birth to Three programs:

- ▶ **CT Birth to Three Procedures and Guidance related to evaluation and assessment**
- ▶ The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) webpage: **Early Identification of Young Children with Disabilities**

Part B, Section 619 of IDEA (preschool special education) requires all states to measure the progress of all students receiving special education from the time they enter preschool to the time they exit preschool. In Connecticut, this Early Childhood Outcome (ECO) data collection is administered by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE). A specific subsection of the Brigance IED-III (2013) is the one statewide assessment instrument that must be administered to collect and report the required ECO data. The ECO data collection is required for all preschool students with an IEP, including those that receive itinerant services only. For more information on this data collection, visit the CSDE **Early Childhood Outcomes webpage**.

Requirements for Follow-up to Evaluation for Part B, Section 619 of IDEA

Effective July 1, 2021, Connecticut Public Act 21-46, Sections 26 and 27 requires that:

- ▶ If a child is found to be ineligible for preschool special education services as a result of the evaluation process, the school will refer families to register for the Sparkler app so that they can engage in continued developmental screening using the Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ); and
- ▶ Districts will provide an alternative form for developmental screening upon request and send reminders to families who do not complete Sparkler registration or return the form to the district.



Ages and Stages

Purpose: The ASQ-3 is a developmental screening tool that helps parents provide information about the developmental status of their child across five areas: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social. The ASQ is available through the Sparkler mobile app or through **CT Help Me Grow** via paper or online. CT Help Me Grow is available to support families with the results of the ASQ and referrals when needed through all three formats.

This purpose aligns to the following purposes outlined by NIEER (see inset box on page 1):
Identify children who may be in need of specialized services.

- ▶ **Data collection:** Questionnaires (completed by families and/or caregivers)
- ▶ **How information is interpreted:** Norm-referenced
- ▶ **Aligned Assessment Process:** Developmental Surveillance: Developmental Screening

Early care and education programs may support families in the use of the ASQ-3 or families may engage directly with CT Help Me Grow or the Sparkler app. Families should be supported in reviewing the results and may be provided with suggestions for follow up, referrals for further evaluation, and/or suggestions for activities to engage their child at home. The ASQ-3 is not intended to provide the information necessary to plan a comprehensive early childhood curriculum, therefore additional observation and/or assessment tools are appropriate to use along with the ASQ-3.

Early, frequent screening of young children for healthy growth and development is recommended to help identify potential problems or areas needing further evaluation. By catching developmental issues early, children can be provided with treatment or intervention more effectively, and additional developmental delays or deficits may be prevented.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2014, p. 2)



Connecticut Documentation for Observation Teaching System (CT DOTS)

Purpose(s): to guide early care and education providers in a process of monitoring children’s progress on the skills, abilities, and behaviors in the Connecticut Early Learning and Development Standards (CT ELDS). Used in conjunction with the CT ELDS, CT DOTS is a foundation for:

- ▶ gathering data about children’s skills, abilities, and behaviors;
- ▶ planning additional supports (e.g., curriculum, instruction, professional development, family activities, adult support);
- ▶ summarizing evidence of children’s progress; and
- ▶ communicating around common goals.

This purpose aligns to the following purposes outlined by NIEER (see inset box on page 1):

Plan instruction for individuals and groups of children; identify program improvement and staff development needs.

- ▶ **Data collection:** Authentic. Information can be collected through naturalistic observations, planned experiences that are developmentally appropriate, and by gathering family input.
- ▶ **How information is interpreted:** Criterion-based (if early care and education programs are implementing curriculum based upon the CT ELDS, this would also be considered curriculum-based interpretation).
- ▶ **Aligned Assessment Processes:**
 - ▶ **Formative:** Data collected on an ongoing basis is used to immediately inform instruction.
 - ▶ **Summative:** Information collected over time can be summarized for individual children and across groups of children. This information can be used in communication with families and other professionals, can inform curriculum planning, and may be used to guide program improvement efforts such as planning professional development topics.
 - ▶ CT DOTS may also play a role in a developmental surveillance process; however, if concerns arise based upon the use of CT DOTS the additional use of a formal screening tool can provide valuable information. This is especially relevant for children from three to five years of age because the CT ELDS and CT DOTS include skills in these age ranges that are highly dependent upon the learning experiences children are exposed to, including content area specific skills. The use of a formal screening tool can provide additional information when working to distinguish between a lack of access to high quality learning experiences and a developmental delay or disability. This formal screening also serves as an important discussion point for communicating with families about their child’s learning and development and whether they have met certain milestones.

References and Additional Resources on Early Childhood Assessment

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). Developmental monitoring and screening. Child Development. www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/screddning.html#:~:text=Developmental%20monitoring%20observes%20how%20your,can%20participate%20in%20developmental%20monitoring

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