

# learning links

Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 8

## Assessing young children at preschool

By Sarah Gatt, Preschool Coordinator, Learning Links

**When early childhood specialists work with young children, they are involved in some part of the assessment process (either formally or informally) each time they interact with a young child.**

As they interact with children even on the simplest level, they consider their current observations of the child, appropriate expectations and outcomes and evaluate the interaction – a form of assessment. If these interactions are within a preschool environment, they take place every day.

### What is assessment in a preschool setting?

Assessment is an opportunity for professionals and families to gather information about a child to help make decisions and determine the best possible way to enhance and promote further development.

It should be a positive experience for all involved, focusing on accurately defining the current skill levels in all areas of each child's development.

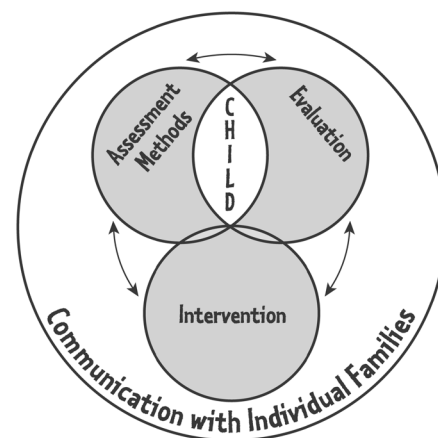
Ideally the process should involve the perspectives of several people and use a number of different techniques on a number of occasions including assessing the learning environment and its potential.

The assessor should establish a positive rapport with the child and family prior to the assessment to maximise the chance of gaining a valid and reliable result. Positive and trusting relationships between the assessor, the child and their family increase the chances of accurate sharing of information.

Children are assessed for a variety of reasons. These can include the improvement of educational opportunities and determining appropriate instruction techniques and other strategies to be used with a child. An assessment should develop a picture of the all round development of each child and how they function within a range of environments.

Effective assessment should be family-focused and use a range of assessment methods and evaluation interlinked with early intervention.

At all times, the assessment process should be supportive, positive and productive where families and children's rights are acknowledged and respected.



*An effective assessment.*

### The rights of the family and child

Appropriate assessment practices view families as teachers of their children and support families as partners in the assessment process.

The process should ideally respond to and take into consideration each individual family's strengths and priorities.

With active family participation, the results of the assessment are more likely to present an accurate and whole picture of the child. This does not mean, however, that families must participate. Families have the right to choose whether or not they wish to participate in their child's assessment and in what ways to participate.

**Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.**

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

**Early Childhood Services** for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

**School Age Services** for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

**Family Services** helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

**Professional Development** for teachers and health professionals.

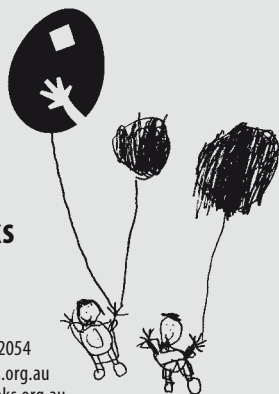
Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

**Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.**

## Learning Links

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Family involvement may vary due to their perception of specialists' roles as well as the family's own perceived levels of knowledge regarding assessment and their child.

Families have the right to be informed about all aspects of assessment as well as participate in discussion focusing on the purpose of assessment. They need to know the various people who will be involved in the assessment as well as the skills and knowledge of each professional.

Families should also be given choices as to various professionals involved.

They have the right to confidentiality, to know assessment proceedings and be informed about the ongoing nature of assessment.

### A child as an individual

Each child being assessed has the right to be viewed and assessed as an individual.

They have the right to a facilitative and supportive environment, a relaxed and unhurried atmosphere and an appropriately paced assessment (including modified resources, strategies and interaction styles) catering to their individual needs.

In addition to these needs, families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have the right to information in their home language as well as an assessment style compatible with the cultural style of their family.

Families are the key participants in the assessment process. Children and families' rights must be acknowledged and used to guide the assessment process so that it has the best chance of generating accurate, reliable and valid results.

### Essential features of assessments of young children

Young children are usually assessed because of concerns that they are not achieving the developmental milestones reached by other children of a similar age.

An in-depth assessment determines the nature of the delay or difficulty and the appropriate services required. Diagnosis may form part of this stage.

A range of assessment techniques is employed by a multidisciplinary team to ensure accurateness of assessment. Standardised test measures are often used at this stage due to eligibility and funding requirements. A child's hearing and vision may also be assessed.

This period of the assessment requires sensitivity from professionals as it is often a stressful time when potential developmental delays or disabilities can be confirmed.

If disabilities are diagnosed or confirmed, the family can choose to enrol their child in an intervention program such as an inclusive preschool. If this occurs, assessment for planning intervention will be undertaken in the child's learning environment.

Individual Family Service Plans (IFSP) can be developed in collaboration with the family to implement the services and needs of the child and family. Integral to the development of the IFSP and process of assessment are evaluation and monitoring change.

Evaluation should be discussed regularly with the child's family and associated professionals such as the preschool teacher. Evaluation allows identification of the extent to which progress is being made and what or if changes to the program should be made.

This process is based on the assumption that early identification and treatment of developmental delays or disabilities is imperative to the long-term outcomes for the child and family.

## Norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests

Standardised tests often form part of the in-depth assessment stage and the results of these tests are often required to satisfy eligibility and funding requirements.

The results also play a large part in diagnosing and categorising young children's developmental delays or disabilities. The strengths and weaknesses of the standard norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests are compared in a table in this article.

Care must be taken with standardised tests as they fail to recognise that children with and without disabilities can vary in ability from age and stage norms without development being viewed as atypical.

Standardised testing also differs from the philosophy of child-centred early childhood education and should be used in conjunction with other varied and informal assessment methods such as work samples and observations of the child.

## What can influence the results of a test?

Early childhood assessment can present a number of challenges relating to a child's individuality, family background and previous life experiences.

The age of the child may inhibit the accurateness of a test due to young children's ability to be distracted.

Behaviours of young children are highly variable and factors of temperament, level of attending skills, physical comfort and health will influence test results. Young children may experience separation anxiety or be wary of unfamiliar adults including the assessor.

In response, the assessor should be flexible in the time the test is scheduled, plan play materials that are interesting, ensure minimal delay between tasks as well as establish a rapport with a child and family prior to the test.

Children with motor, communication or sensory impairments may not present a true indication of their abilities though standardised assessment unless modifications to test materials are made. Test modifications must be made so that children's abilities rather than disabilities are measured.

A child's cultural and language background may also influence the results of standardised or other assessments.

Norm groups (or group results that children are compared with) may not accurately represent the cultural group of a particular family. The cognitive styles and social expectations of children from varied cultural backgrounds may also be different to the comparative norm group.

In families from some cultural backgrounds, the sex of the child may affect the family's expectation of them and their test results either positively or negatively. The socioeconomic status of a child's family may also affect test results in terms of the child's environment and exposure to resources.

Standardised tests require careful examination in relation to these issues. Such tests are mainly based on traditional middle class values and expectations in terms of age level and developmental milestones and may penalise families deviating from this perception of the so-called 'norm'.

Early childhood assessors need to ensure assessment is as fair as possible by using multiple methods of data collection, involving the family in the assessment process and focussing on the child's skills. Each test item should be considered for bias.

Assessors would also benefit from examining their own background and biases. By recognising and acknowledging our own biases we can then attempt to set these aside when testing children from diverse backgrounds. Another useful strategy in the assessment of children from minority groups is to include an assessor from the same cultural or language group.

## Reliability and validity of assessment results

Reliability measures the consistency of the test performance, while validity is the extent a test performs the function for which it was intended. For assessment results to be accurate and useful, tests must be both valid and reliable.

Collecting information from multiple settings and sources, on multiple occasions and using multiple measures can help reliability and validity. Tests in isolation are less valid and reliable; assessment must be carried out through a variety of approaches through a multi-disciplinary team.

Family participation throughout assessment adds greatly to the validity and reliability of the assessment as the family offers essential background information and interpretations of the child's actions.

Reviewing the test contents and determining how these reflect the areas to be tested can assist validity.

Reliability involves examination of the test's characteristics (such as materials required) and administrative errors (such as scoring errors). There are many ways to ensure a test's reliability including analysis of administrative procedures, testing and retesting using different forms of the same measure, as well as the standardised Error of Measurement which indicates a range in which the individual's true score is likely to fall in one test.

There are many important issues relating to the administration and interpretation of the assessment process and results. Assessors need to be aware of varied assessment approaches, methods and related bias and be able to measure validity and reliability to gain an appropriate and meaningful outcome from the assessment process.



# Strengths and weaknesses of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests

## Norm-Referenced Tests

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### STRENGTHS

- Diagnose and categorise children, determining eligibility for services. This may also be considered a weakness.
- Provide information easily communicated to families and others unfamiliar with tests.
- Provide valuable information about a child's level of functioning in areas covered by the test.
- Take little time to administer.
- Compares the child with a referent group. This may also be considered a weakness.

### WEAKNESSES

- May provide information too general to be useful in everyday classroom activities.
- Designed for national use – there is a discrepancy between what is being taught in individual classrooms and what is tested.
- Age norms for assessment tools used in Australia are often developed in other countries where populations are not typical of Australian children.
- Promote and reinforce that the problem is within the child because the test's main purpose is to compare students.
- Give limited information about the way a child learns.
- Contain no answer about mastery of specific skills about what a student can or cannot do and no information for needs based curriculum planning.
- Can be insensitive.

## Criterion-Referenced Tests

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### STRENGTHS

- Seek to determine which individuals have reached some pre-established level and what the child can do.
- Test results can be used to determine the next most logical skill to teach and is therefore linked with intervention.
- Implications for teaching are direct.
- Can be used in evaluation to note student progress and determine if instruction is effective.
- Focus on skill level rather than comparison with other children.

### WEAKNESSES

- Difficulty of establishing suitable criterion – what should the child know?
- At what level should the skill be performed for the student to be noted to achieve the particular skill? Difficulty of reporting only two levels of an achievement as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory when achievement should exist at many levels.
- Skills assessed may become the only goals of instruction leading to loss of richness and variety in the child's instruction.
- Problem of repeated testings for children not reaching the criterion at first thus the need to create multiple parallel test forms.



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**School Age Services**  
– contact your local branch

**Family Services**  
– contact your local branch

**All other enquiries**  
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