

Issues in Testing Very Young Children

How early is too early? As testing has grown more widespread in recent decades, important issues have arisen concerning how to ensure that early childhood testing is used appropriately and with positive educational benefits.

One of the kindergartens we applied to requires that children do well on a test before they can be enrolled. I can see how this makes sense for college—but kindergarten? How long has this been going on?

Actually, this kind of testing has been happening for a long time. Testing young children became a frequent practice when educational testing first became popular in the early 1900s. By the late 1980s, 19 states required mandatory kindergarten screening tests.

However, while noting the usefulness of some types of early childhood testing, researchers have also pointed out that tests tend to be less reliable at very early ages. This and other concerns have led to some changes in thinking and practice over the years. In 1998, a group of experts reviewed existing research and practice on the assessment of young children and recommended that:

“..screening tests should not be used as readiness tests to exclude children from school; they should not be used to track children by ability in kindergarten and first grade; and they should not be used to plan instruction unless a valid relationship with local curricula has been established.”

The cautions of testing researchers, combined with their own experiences, have resulted in most states delaying the testing of children in public schools until the 3rd grade. The 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* requires state testing in mathematics, reading/language arts, and science, starting in third grade.

Nonetheless, a number of private schools, including Catholic schools, do require entering kindergartners to pass a test as part of their admission requirements. Some public elementary schools also continue to test very young children and use the results for key decisions, such as entry into a gifted public school.

Early childhood researcher Sam Meisels points to an unintended consequence of the increased societal emphasis on accountability, which has led to increased testing of young children. In a 1998 report entitled *Assessing Readiness*, he noted:

Resources

Helpful Web Sites

CAESL

<http://www.caesl.org/>

CRESST

<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/>

WestEd

<http://www.wested.org/>

Parent Portal at LHS

<http://lhsparent.org>

Greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/>

National PTA

<http://www.pta.org/>

National Parent Information Network

<http://www.NPIN.org/>

Family Education Network

<http://www.familyeducation.com>



“Recognizing the escalation of academic and accountability demands in the kindergarten...parents in increasing numbers seek to protect their children from these demands by holding their children out from school until they are a year older than the standard entry age.”

What guidelines have been established for assessing young children?

In 1998, the Goal 1 Early Childhood Assessments Resource Group recommended to the National Education Goals Panel the following guidelines for the assessment of young children:

1. Before age 8, standardized achievement measures are not sufficiently accurate to be used for high-stakes decision-making about individual children and schools. Therefore, high-stakes assessments intended for accountability purposes should be delayed until the end of third grade (or preferably fourth grade).
2. ...[prior to the third grade] policymakers at the state and district level could reasonably require that teachers and the schools have procedures in place to monitor student progress using instructionally relevant assessments, and that schools have a plan for providing intensified special help if children are having difficulty, especially learning to read.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) offers a general rule for testing young children:

“The purpose of testing must be to improve services for children and ensure that children benefit from their educational experiences.”

Specific NAEYC guidelines support the use of more than just test scores for assessing young children. They emphasize that decisions that have a major impact on children, such as enrollment, retention, or assignment to remedial or special classes, should be based on multiple sources of information and should never be based on a single test score.



What You Can Do

- Become familiar with the ways testing is used in your child's school and district, and consider possible limitations, especially when standardized tests are used to make major decisions in early grades.
- Support school use of many indicators of performance, especially for young children. Teachers can provide parents valuable information about both academic and social progress. A parent/teacher conference is an excellent opportunity to learn more about your child's strengths and areas needing improvement.
- Use K–3 report cards to understand how your child is doing in school. Many K–3 report cards provide a developmental report of your child's progress in both academics and social skills.
- Encourage your children to begin thinking about their own progress, especially to gain insight into how their own efforts can play an important role in their success.

Useful Resources

Standardized Testing of Young Children 3 Through 8 Years of Age (1987). Washington DC. American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education.

Principles and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments (1998), Lorrie Shepard, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Emily Wurtz, editors. Submitted to the National Education Goals Panel, www.negp.gov/Reports/prinrec.pdf

A Developmental Approach to Assessment of Young Children. (1997). Lilian Katz. National Parent Information Network. <http://www.ericseece.org/pubs/digests/1997/katz97.html>

Standardized Testing of Young Children: 3 Through 8 Years of Age (1987). National Association for the Education of Young Children: http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/pstest98.pdf.

Parents Page: <http://www.cse.ucla.edu/CRESST/pages/infoparent.htm>

National Association for the Education of Young Children (1997). http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/pstest98.pdf



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Note: This article was developed by the Public Understanding strand of CAESL to summarize basic information for parents and the general public. It is not a CAESL position statement nor does it necessarily represent the precise views of diverse reviewers. We welcome comments!

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0119790.

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