

A photograph showing a woman and a young child leaning over a table, looking at a document together. The woman is smiling and pointing at the document, while the child is also looking intently. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting like a classroom or office.

Measuring Children's Developmental Progress

Perspectives of State Early Intervention and
Early Childhood Coordinators and Technical
Assistance Facilitators

March 2018

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Childhood Coordinators and Technical Assistance
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Executive Summary

Purpose

The National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) conducted a series of focused conversations on child assessment with 31 Part C (Infant–Toddler) and Part B-619 (Preschool) program state representatives and NCSI Technical Assistance (TA) Facilitators. The purpose was to learn more about how state early intervention and early childhood programs use measures, tools, and other assessment approaches to gather information about children’s developmental progress, and learn about the challenges encountered in selecting, administering, and using these measures. The results can be used to guide future technical assistance to states on how to choose developmental measures for different purposes.

Method

All state Part C and Part B-619 representatives and all NCSI Part C and Part B-619 TA Facilitators received an email inviting them to participate in focused conversations on measuring children’s developmental progress. Group discussions were conducted as WebEx conference calls, with a facilitator following a standard set of guiding questions that had been designed by an NCSI measurement workgroup and reviewed by TA Center

partners and an OSEP representative. Written notes and recordings of the conversations were used to code the responses, and the resulting response categories for each of the guiding questions served as an analysis tool in interpreting and summarizing the findings.

Results

Current Assessment Practices

Participants in all three groups identified a wide range of assessment tools that states currently use to measure children’s developmental progress across all five developmental domains recommended by IDEA for Part C (cognition, communication, adaptive skills, physical development, social-emotional development) and age groups. Participants also reported that most states use a variety of tools within programs rather than a single, state-identified assessment. Many participants reported using the Child Outcome Summary (COS) Process, and some discussed the tools that inform the COS Process to measure children’s developmental progress. Participants in all groups indicated that assessments of children’s developmental progress were administered by qualified personnel such as early interventionists and primary coaches, early childhood special education teachers; speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, service coordinators, and assessment specialists). With respect to the timing and frequency of

assessment, some state participants reported that assessments usually occurred upon the child's entry to and exit from the program, but others reported that providers were required to administer developmental progress assessments more frequently—up to three times per year. Most participants across all groups indicated that child assessment data were stored and managed digitally as part of statewide databases, and other participants whose states were not using digital databases reported that they were planning to move in this direction. Several state participants noted that sharing data was their biggest challenge, and a few participants mentioned that states were engaged in efforts aimed at using measures of children's developmental progress to evaluate the impact of their program improvement initiatives as part of the SSIP, but few specific details were provided.

Challenges

Participants across all three groups mentioned challenges with respect to assessment administration, data quality, time and logistical constraints, and data management. Ensuring that practitioners were adequately trained to administer, translate, and interpret assessment results for various purposes, including to communicate with families, share results with others, and guide individual-child-level decision-making, was a particular challenge emphasized by many participants.

Need for Additional Resources

Participants identified the need for several resources to help states better utilize measures of child developmental progress in the future. These included (a) methods for ensuring high-quality, consistent administration of child assessments, (b) professional guidance on how to translate and interpret assessment results for various purposes, and (c) more information about available tools, including the characteristics and properties of each tool to assist in selecting appropriate measures of developmental progress for various age groups and developmental domains.

Recommendations

1. Additional information provided to states could clarify how measures of developmental progress can be used for various purposes, including intervention planning and decision-making, and evaluating statewide program improvement efforts as part of the SSIP. States also need guidance about which assessment tools are most appropriate for measuring developmental progress.
2. A shared definition and agreed-upon terminology for assessment of children's developmental progress would provide greater clarity and improve communication with families and other stakeholder groups.

3. Additional resources, such as tool charts and guidance on effective assessment practices, are needed to assist states interested in adopting or improving assessment of children’s developmental progress.
4. With respect to evaluating program improvement as part of the SSIP, there is a particular need for additional resources and guidance on how to administer child assessments reliably and how to aggregate the results across groups of children to demonstrate progress toward the SIMRs.
5. The next phase of this work should involve a cross-center group of TA stakeholders and leaders to discuss the findings of this report, establish the broader context for these results, and develop a plan for responding to the challenges and priorities that states have identified for improving assessment practices related to measuring children’s developmental progress.

Conclusions

States currently are engaged in assessment practices related to measuring children’s developmental progress, although there is wide variability with respect to the specific tools and approaches being used and the aspects of learning and development being measured for different age groups. States face significant challenges in gathering high-quality data and understanding how the results of such measures could be used, not only to monitor individual child progress, but also to show progress for groups of children as part of evaluating statewide program improvement efforts. Participants expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to discuss this topic, and identified several resources that would be helpful to states that might seek to adopt or improve child assessment practices in the future. These results can be used to inform future technical assistance services and products to support states in effective child assessment practices.

Full Report

Purpose

The National Center for Systemic Improvement (NCSI) conducted a series of focused conversations on child assessment with 31 Part C (Infant–Toddler) and Part B-619 (Preschool) program state representatives and NCSI Technical Assistance (TA) Facilitators. States already have a system for reporting data on child outcomes and are engaged in various activities to assess children’s developmental progress. The purpose of this activity was to learn more about how state early intervention and early childhood programs use measures, tools, and other assessment approaches to gather information about children’s developmental progress, and the challenges encountered in selecting, administering, and using these measures. The results were intended to guide future technical assistance to states on how developmental measures could be used to for various purposes, including evaluation of their Systematic State Improvement Plans (SSIPs).

Method

To recruit participants, we emailed a letter of invitation along with several follow-up reminders to every state Part C and Part B-619 representative and all NCSI Part C and Part B-619 TA Facilitators. We conducted separate facilitated group discussions with a total of 31 participants across three groups:

(1) state Part C representatives (N = 15), (2) state Part B-619 representatives (N = 11), and (3) NCSI TA Facilitators to Part C states (N = 5). Across all state Part C and B-619 participants, 23 unique states were represented. Eight (35%) of the participants were representing Southern states, five (22%) were representing Midwestern states, seven (30%) were representing Western states, and three (13%) were representing Northeastern states. With respect to the size of state populations, five (22%) participants represented small states, 11 (28%) represented medium states, and seven (30%) represented large states.

All of the group discussions were conducted virtually as WebEx conference calls during two sessions lasting 45–60 minutes each, with the exception of the NCSI Part C TA Facilitator conversation, which was conducted over a single session lasting 60 minutes. We used a standard set of guiding questions and probes across each of the focused discussion groups.

The set of guiding questions and probes was organized under three broad topics: (1) current practices across the state related to gathering and using assessment data for measuring children’s developmental progress; (2) challenges faced across the state in finding or using measures of children’s developmental progress for any purpose, including the requirement to demonstrate progress on the SIMRs; and

(3) the need for additional resources that would help states measure children’s developmental progress and demonstrate progress on the SIMR. Participants were informed that the information they shared would remain confidential, and were encouraged to respond freely to all of the questions or comments posed by the facilitator and other participants. All of the focused conversations with participants were recorded and documented through two sets of written notes documenting verbal and typed chat box responses. Responses to each question and probe were coded into a set of response categories, along with a count of how often each response was given, and a count of the number of states responding under each response category. The coded response categories served as an aid in analyzing and summarizing the results.

Results

Current Practices for Gathering and Using Measures of Children’s Developmental Progress

Types of Assessment Tools. Participants across all three groups were asked to identify assessment tools that states were using to measure children’s developmental progress. Table 1 shows the complete list of assessment tools that were identified. A few state participants mentioned that their states were using only one state-identified assessment tool.

Most state Part C participants reported that providers were using a variety of assessment tools across the state. One participant reported that, although her state encouraged programs to use multiple methods and sources to assess children, no particular tools were specified. Another participant said, “We have a broad range of what people are using and some say they don’t know how to do this (assess children’s developmental progress). OTs [occupational therapists] and PTs [physical therapists] have strong ways of measuring progress; others do not.” Another state Part C participant identified a range of assessment tools being used in the state; some were designed for eligibility determination, annual assessments, and entry and exit outcome assessment, and others were designed as ongoing developmental assessments—the participant acknowledged that “the variability creates difficulty.” TA Facilitator participants also noted the wide range of assessments used to measure children’s developmental progress, with one participant mentioning that “not all states have specified their tools” and that “one state is still looking for tools.”

In addition to the specific assessment tools that were identified, several state Part C participants mentioned that they were using the Child Outcome Summary (COS) Process, and some discussed the tools that inform the COS Process. Many TA Facilitators echoed the widespread use of the COS Process among the states in which they worked. A few comments by state Part C

participants provided additional information about how the COS ratings were generated. One state Part C participant said, “We use the COS Process but not the actual [COS] form. We’ve integrated the three global child outcome areas into the IFSP [Individual Family Service Plan] and the team assessment narrative. We require the use of a comprehensive assessment tool as an age anchor. We emphasize that this is only one piece of information.”

“OTs [occupational therapists] and PTs [physical therapists] have strong ways of measuring progress; others do not.”

Developmental Domains Assessed.

With respect to developmental domains assessed, state Part C participants emphasized that they gathered information on children’s progress across the entire Part C age range (birth to three) in all five developmental domains required by IDEA (cognitive, physical, social-emotional, adaptive, communication), in addition to the three global child outcome areas within the Child Outcome Summary Process (social-emotional, knowledge and skills, actions to meet needs).

One participant noted that her state was searching for additional assessment tools for use with newborns through six months of age. One TA Facilitator noted that many states do not administer assessments until children have received services for at least six months after they enter the program.

Roles of Personnel Administering Assessments.

Participants across all three groups indicated that assessments measuring children’s developmental progress were administered by various staff, including frontline service providers, such as early interventionists and special education teachers; as well as related service personnel, such as speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, primary coaches, and Service Coordinators. A few state Part C participants mentioned that dedicated assessment specialists were also involved in administering developmental progress measures to children. TA Facilitators echoed the variability in roles of personnel who conducted child assessments across states and noted that some states require that assessors meet certain personnel or licensure standards set by the state, and/or the training and certification requirements associated with particular assessment tools.

Frequency and Timing of Assessment.

When asked how often measures of developmental progress were gathered on children, some state Part C and B-619 participants noted that these assessments usually occurred upon children’s entry and exit to the program, but others indicated that assessments occurred more frequently to measure ongoing progress (e.g., three times quarterly, for periodic and annual IFSPs). A few state participants emphasized that “we require” ongoing assessment, or service providers “are told” to conduct assessments to measure children’s

developmental progress, but participants did not indicate the extent to which guidelines were being followed. TA Facilitators generally indicated that states administer measures of children’s developmental progress annually, upon entry and exit to the program, or when the SSIP is updated, but sometimes more frequently, such as during IFSP meetings occurring every six months.

Data Management. Most state Part C and B-619 participants indicated that data resulting from measuring children’s developmental progress were stored and managed digitally within online databases. TA Facilitators indicated that, although many states have online or web-based data management systems, some states continue to maintain paper records of completed score sheets in each child’s folder; however, there was broad consensus that all states were moving in the direction of adopting digital data management systems. One TA Facilitator stated, “Increasingly, even at least some of the informal information is put into the state database—but not all of it and not in all states.”

Data Use. Several state Part C and B-619 participants mentioned that sharing data was their biggest challenge. One participant stated that practitioners were encouraged to discuss children’s assessment results with families in conjunction with scoring decisions. A few participants stated that aggregate assessment results were shared as a report on their websites and through

other public reporting methods such as one-page printed documents, and that the assessment results for an individual child also were available within local agencies. One state Part C participant mentioned that although the current focus was on sharing data required for the Annual Performance Report for OSEP (Office of Special Education Programs), her state was engaged in conversations about how to use progress monitoring results to evaluate the impact of their professional development efforts on child and family outcomes. Another state Part C participant concurred with the need to move in this direction, reporting that this was the main focus of her state’s SSIP.

Challenges in Finding or Using Measures of Children’s Developmental Progress

Identifying Assessment Tools. Few participants across all three groups identified challenges in finding measures that programs could use to measure children’s developmental progress. However, one TA Facilitator pointed to the difficulty of finding social-emotional tools appropriate for use with children birth to three. One state Part C participant stated that it didn’t really matter which tool is used, “because all tools have limits at this age group.” Another state Part C participant mentioned the challenge in finding tools that measured functional versus discrete skills in young children.

Assessment Challenges. Across all groups, participants mentioned many additional challenges with respect to the

administration of these measures, data quality, time and logistical constraints, the lack of resources, data management, and, in particular, the need for better use of the assessment results for programming and intervention decision-making. One state Part B-619 participant mentioned that providers had difficulty summarizing and using the assessment results, and that at the state level, she had difficulty helping providers understand that the purpose of gathering assessment information was not simply to generate reports. A participant in the state Part C group echoed this sentiment when she said that “some folks still rely on checking boxes on an assessment tool,” and she expressed concern that practitioners might not be relying on other sources of information such as family interviews and structured observations to make informed decisions, which is a recommended practice in early childhood. Another state Part C participant expressed a concern about team members not doing an adequate job of sharing assessment information with others. To address time and logistical constraints, a few state Part C participants stated that they were employing assessment approaches to “monitor progress on an ongoing basis” to ensure that this is “not an extra task but is incorporated into the family visit.”

Need for Professional Supports.

Ensuring that practitioners were adequately trained to administer the measures was another significant challenge mentioned by multiple participants across all three groups. Participants noted that professional

development and ongoing professional supports were critical in ensuring that practitioners could gather high-quality, consistent data; translate the assessment information for families; and apply the information in various aspects of their work. Some participants noted that states lack the professional resources needed to support high-quality assessment practices.

Demonstrating Progress on the SSIP.

Participants were also asked about challenges states face in demonstrating progress on their state’s SIMR for evaluating program improvements on the SSIP.* This question generated the fewest responses across groups. One state Part C participant acknowledged that her state’s efforts to improve the quality of the data gathered had produced the unintended consequence of the assessment results going down rather than up. Her explanation was that “it’s unreasonable to think program improvements will show impacts until the end of the SSIP cycle. It’s hard to hold enough variables constant to be sure that results are caused by implementation.”

This perspective was echoed by another state Part C participant who stated that it would be impossible to say how changes in children’s outcomes were impacted by changes in practice because her state had changed its measurement system while these improvements were being implemented. Another state Part C participant said that her state was working toward integrating the COS Process with the

* As part of their SPP/APR, States must report data annually (expressed as actual numbers and percentages) that are aligned with the SiMR. The State must report on whether the State met its target. In addition, the State may report on any additional data (e.g., progress monitoring data) that were collected and analyzed that would suggest progress toward the SiMR. <https://osep.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/14807>

IFSP process, and that this, too, had resulted in lower child outcome scores, at least initially.

Asked directly about whether states were planning to use measures of children’s developmental progress to demonstrate progress on the SIMR, none of the state Part C or B-619 participants responded directly with specific examples of assessment approaches or tools. One TA Facilitator participant mentioned that a key challenge for states is accurately explaining and documenting growth for children who make some progress, but do not reach age expectations by age 3. Other TA Facilitators noted that states are trying to use standardized tools within the COS Process for the SSIP, but these practices did not appear to be happening consistently by states.

Need for Additional Resources Related to Assessment of Children’s Developmental Progress

Participants were asked to identify any additional information or resources that would be helpful to states in identifying measures of children’s developmental progress or using the results to demonstrate changes on the SIMR. One state Part C participant mentioned that it would be helpful to have information on how to

“It’s unreasonable to think program improvements will show impacts until the end of the SSIP (State Systemic Improvement Plan) cycle.”

improve the quality of data resulting from measures of child developmental progress, for example, by obtaining more information on methods for assessing inter-rater reliability to ensure consistent administration of these assessments. The same participant also emphasized the need for additional professional guidance to help practitioners translate and interpret assessment results. Another state Part C participant suggested that a compilation of what other states are using for measuring children’s development progress and further discussions with states would be useful. When prompted, several TA and state participants also agreed that having a tools chart with information about available tools and the characteristics and properties of each tool would be very helpful in selecting appropriate measures of developmental progress for various age groups and domains.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations can be used to help states better utilize measures of developmental progress and help guide technical assistance services and products in this regard.

1. Participants reported using a wide variety of assessment tools to measure children’s developmental progress, some of which might not be appropriate for this purpose. Therefore, additional information provided to states could clarify how measures of children’s

developmental progress can be used for a variety of purposes—for example, informing intervention planning and decision-making, and evaluating statewide program improvement efforts through the SSIP. States also need guidance about which assessment tools are most appropriate for measuring developmental progress, aspects of learning and development that can be measured in very young children, how frequently assessment should occur, which assessment approaches work best for diverse groups, and how the results can be managed and used most effectively.

2. Participants used various terms to describe practices related to measuring developmental progress. A shared definition and agreed-upon terminology for assessment of children’s developmental progress would provide greater clarity and improve the early childhood field’s ability to communicate with families and other stakeholder groups. Currently terms such as formative assessment, developmental screening, and progress monitoring are being used, but there is a lack of shared understanding of these terms across states.
3. Resources such as tool charts, brief reports on the meaning and use of various types of assessments, guidelines for adopting and implementing new assessment tools, and opportunities for further cross-state conversations are needed to support states interested in

adopting or improving assessment practices related to measuring children’s developmental progress. In particular, several participants requested more information on specific tools that are designed to measure developmental progress in key domains such as social-emotional development, language and literacy, and cognitive development for various age groups, as well as methods to improve the quality of assessments.

4. Participants appeared to lack experience with the use of measures of children’s developmental progress to demonstrate progress on the SIMR. With respect to evaluating program improvement as part of the Systematic State Improvement Plans (SSIPs), there is a particular need for additional resources and guidance on how to administer child assessments reliably and how to aggregate the results across groups of children to demonstrate progress toward the SIMRs.
5. The next phase of this work should involve a cross-center group of TA stakeholders and leaders to discuss the findings of this report, establish the broader context for these results, and develop a plan for responding to the challenges and priorities that states have identified for improving assessment practices related to measuring children’s developmental progress.

Conclusions

This series of focused conversations with states and TA Facilitators indicated that many states are already engaged in assessment practices related to measuring children’s developmental progress, along with the use of assessment for other purposes such as determining eligibility for special services and reporting annually to OSEP on child outcomes. The results also indicated wide variability across states with respect to the specific tools and approaches being used and the aspects of learning and development being measured for different age groups. The discussions also revealed significant challenges in understanding how the results of such measures could be used not only to monitor individual child progress, but also to show progress for groups of children as part of statewide evaluation of program improvement efforts. Participants expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to discuss this topic, and identified several resources that would be helpful to states that might seek to adopt or improve child assessment practices in the future. These included disseminating a tools chart, providing guidance on assessment

principles and practices, and offering additional opportunities to participate in focused conversations on measures of children’s developmental progress (to exchange further information and ideas about supports on this topic).

Authors’ Note

The results of the focused conversations on child assessment with state Part C and Part B-619 Coordinators and NCSI TA Facilitators reflect an effort to gather information on current assessment practices and challenges related to measuring children’s developmental progress. Given the unique contexts and difficulties associated with assessing very young children enrolled in Part C and Part B-619 programs, the results point to the need for continued conversations to support additional sharing and learning opportunities on this topic for states, with a particular focus on how states can use child assessments to show progress toward the SIMRs. The results of this report will be useful in guiding future needs-sensing activities and TA services to states.

Appendix A: Assessment Tools Identified as Measures of Children’s Developmental Progress

Abbreviation	Tool	Website	Publisher/ Developer	Publication Year
AEPS	Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System for Infants and Children	http://www.brookespublishing.com/resource-center/screening-and-assessment/aeps/	Brookes Publishing	2002
ASQ-3	Ages and Stages Questionnaire–Third Edition	http://agesandstages.com/products-services/asq3/	Brookes Publishing	2009
BDI-2	Battelle Developmental Inventory, Second Edition	http://www.hmhco.com/hmh-assessments/early-childhood/bdi-2	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	2016
Brigance IED III–Early Childhood Edition	Brigance Inventory of Early Development III–Early Childhood Edition	http://www.curriculumassociates.com/products/detail.aspx?title=BRI GSE-IED3-sum	Curriculum Associates	2013
CCITSN-3	The Carolina Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers with Special Needs–Third Edition	http://products.brookespublishing.com/The-Carolina-Curriculum-for-Infants-and-Toddlers-with-Special-Needs-CCITSN-Third-Edition-P485.aspx	Brookes Publishing	2004
COR	Classroom Observation Record	https://highscope.org/assessment/child	HighScope	2004
DAYC-2	Developmental Assessment of Young Children–Second Edition	http://www.proedinc.com/customer/productView.aspx?id=5157	ProEd	2013
DP-3	Developmental Profile–Third Edition	http://www.wpspublish.com/store/p/2743/developmental-profile-3-dp-3	WPS (Western Psychological Services) Publishers	2007

Abbreviation	Tool	Website	Publisher/ Developer	Publication Year
E-LAP	Early Learning Accomplishment Profile	http://cctop.org/Products/LAP-System/The-Early-Lap.htm	Kaplan Early Learning	2005
HELP	Hawaii Early Learning Profile Birth to Three	http://www.vort.com/home.php?cat=1	Vort	2006
IDA	Infant-Toddler Development Assessment	http://www.hmhco.com/hmh-assessments/other-clinical-assessments/ida	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	1995
IGDI ECI	Individual Growth and Development Indicators: Early Communication Indicators	http://igdi.ku.edu/what-are-igdis/general-description-of-the-igdis/key-skill-elements-of-early-communication/	University of Kansas	2007
KIDS	Kindergarten Individual Developmental Survey	https://www.isbe.net/kids	Illinois State Board of Education	2015
MEISR	Measure of Engagement, Independence, and Social Relationships	http://inclusioninstitute.fpg.unc.edu/sites/inclusioninstitute.fpg.unc.edu/files/handouts/MEISR%20-%20Web.pdf	McWilliam and Hornstein	2012
PICCOLO	Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes	http://www.brookespublishing.com/resource-center/screening-and-assessment/piccolo/	Brookes Publishing	2013
TSG	Teaching Strategies Gold	https://teachingstrategies.com/gold-early-childhood-assessment/	Teaching Strategies	2011
N/A	Portage Guide, Third Edition	http://www.portageproject.org/home/products/portage-guide-3	The Portage Project	2015