

School Readiness

Reprinted from Birth to Five Policy Alliance

Every year, more than three million children enroll in a public kindergarten program. A momentous time in their young lives, each child enters with different strengths, weaknesses, skills and needs. But how do we know they are ready?

- **There are multiple purposes for child assessment.** The selection of an assessment tool, the training for assessors, and the use of assessment data are all determined by the purpose for which the assessment is used. Purposes have included: to support instruction, to identify those with special needs, for program evaluation, and for “high stakes” accountability.
 - Ongoing assessment to support instruction: Provides information to teachers about children’s current competencies and should be designed to provide information quickly to teachers.
 - Screening for special needs: Used to identify children who may be at risk for or experiencing developmental delays and need additional diagnostic follow-up.
 - Early childhood program evaluation/accountability: There is growing concern about the appropriateness of some early childhood assessment measures when used to evaluate programs and in the context of high-stakes assessment. Readiness assessments are only one measure of a program’s effectiveness. These should be combined with data about the quality of the program, as well as non-program factors (e.g., the backgrounds of the children and families).[5],[6]
- **One-time assessments do not capture all of the experiences children have before entering school.** Such assessments should not be seen as reflecting on the quality of early care and education during the prekindergarten year in isolation from demographic risk, experiences in the home and the community, other early care and education experiences, and the resources available to support professional development and improve quality.[5]
- **The selection of child assessments should be informed by a clear understanding of how the data will be used and consideration of the children to be assessed.** Child assessments must be appropriate for the child, e.g. children with special needs, children whose primary language is not English, and children from diverse cultural backgrounds.[5]
- **All 50 states and the District of Columbia have developed Early Learning Guidelines (ELG) for early education,** defining the skills and abilities young children should develop for a successful start in kindergarten. Most states stress that their ELGs are not meant to be used to monitor statewide percentages of children “ready for school,” nor to be used to hold children and

programs accountable. Rather, the purpose of the ELGs are to help early care and education providers improve teacher practices, select instructional tools and make decisions about child assessment practices. ELGs also serve the function of educating parents and ensuring continuity between skills learned in preschool and kindergarten.[2]

- **School readiness is not just about academics**, but also about social-emotional development and physical health. This fact is recognized by the states. Almost all states' Early Learning Guidelines include guidelines for social-emotional development (e.g., self-control, social relationships, cooperation) and physical health (e.g., large and fine motor development, healthy practices).[2]
- **Learning in the academic areas of mathematics, language and literacy, science, and social studies cannot proceed unless children are physically and emotionally healthy and ready to learn.** For example, a child with a toothache may find it difficult to focus on classroom instruction. And social-emotional problems such as ADHD are linked to poorer school performance.[1]
- The 2008 National Research Council report on early childhood assessment highlights a number of **common challenges states face in assessing young children**, including:[3]
 - a purpose that is ambiguous or not explicitly communicated,
 - using assessments for multiple purposes,
 - narrowly focusing assessments on language and mathematics to the exclusion of physical, social and emotional development; and
 - difficulty in matching an assessment instrument to the specific purpose for which it was designed to be used.
- **Readiness depends on supportive families, schools, and communities.** Key factors that contribute to children's readiness for school include: the family context; the context and quality of their child care arrangements prior to school entry; and the resources available within the community to support at-risk children and families such as health, mental health, family support, and nutrition services. In addition to thinking about "ready children," states should also consider the concepts of "ready schools" and "ready communities." Ready schools support the transition from preschool to kindergarten by ensuring continuity between the two settings. Ready communities provide high-quality comprehensive programs and services to support at-risk families with young children and work with state leadership to communicate the needs of their communities.[2]
- **Developing Kindergarten Readiness and Other Large-Scale Assessment Systems: Necessary**

Considerations in the Assessment of Young Children (NAEYC) This paper provides background for state and local policy makers and program developers who are considering the implementation of assessment systems for young children.

References

1. Currie, J. (2005). Health Disparities and Gaps in School Readiness. *The Future of Children*, 15(1), 117-138.
2. Daily, S., Burkhauser, M., & Halle, T. (2010). A Review of School Readiness Practices in the States: Early Learning Guidelines and Assessments. *Early Childhood Highlights*, 1(3).
3. National Research Council. (2006). *Early childhood assessment: Why, what, and how?* Committee on Developmental Outcomes and Assessments for Young Children, C. E. Snow and S. B. Van Hemel (Eds). Board on Children, Youth and Families, Board on Testing and Assessment, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
4. Snow, K. (2011). *Developing kindergarten readiness and other large-scale assessment systems: Necessary considerations in the assessment of young children.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
5. Zaslow, M., Tout, K., Halle, T., & Forry, N. (2009). Multiple purposes for measuring quality in early childhood settings: Implications for collecting and communicating information on quality. OPRE Issue Brief #2. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.