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TEST RESOURCE GUIDE

Volume II

**PRESCHOOL ASSESSMENT
AND
KINDERGARTEN SUPPLEMENT**

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INTRODUCTION

Volume II, Preschool Assessment, consists of reviews of tests and other measures that may be used to obtain information about the preschool child who is suspected of having an educational disability. This volume is one in a series of guides for assessment in the New York City Public Schools.

ORGANIZATION OF VOLUME II PRESCHOOL ASSESSMENT

The tests reviewed in Preschool Assessment are arranged alphabetically by title and include cognitive, adaptive, social-emotional, speech and language, and achievement measures. Most of the testing tools are multi-domain batteries intended by the author to be used with children under the age of five.

Reviews of those tests that are included here, but which are also suitable for students beyond pre-school, focus on their use with the very young child. Reviews focusing on the use of these tests with older students will be found in other volumes of the Test Resource Guide. Tests that are appropriate for use with kindergarten students (5-year-olds) but not pre-schoolers are presented in a supplement to this volume.

Each test review consists of the author's statement of the purpose of the test, a description of the instrument including administration and scoring, a review of its psychometric properties, and a section entitled Special Alerts/Comments in which the assessment professional is advised of the appropriateness of the test for special populations and use of resulting test scores. Most of the comments in this section reflect the experience of New York City assessment professionals who have reviewed and used many of these instruments.

Inclusion in the Test Resource Guide does not signify approval. A review simply means that a test specialist and clinician have studied the test. Users of the Guide should read the entire review focusing on the Special Alerts Section which provides information on recommended uses of the test. For New York City public school students, tests in the Guide should be used consistent with guidelines in the Special Alerts/Comments section. Tests that are not in the Guide should be used consistent with the Manual and interpreted with care; note that information about these tests should be sent to the Office of the Executive Director, Division of Special Education as per updating instructions in the Appendix.

TESTING IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Functions of Preschool Assessment

Individual psychoeducational assessment provides information needed for the identification of young children eligible for special education services. The principal emphasis of early identification activities should be on the child's current functioning and the development of an appropriate educational plan. The focus should not be on prediction of future learning or school performance. Reports on the child should relate the child's current performance to observed strengths and weaknesses and NOT to future performance.

The developmental immaturity of preschool children poses challenges both for those who construct tests and for those who assess young children. Users of the tests in this Guide are urged to read this introduction about the characteristics of preschool children and preschool assessment.

Developmental milestones. Many assessment tools are based on developmental milestones which are generally formulated from research conducted with selected samples of young children. In the best norm- and criterion-referenced measures, milestones were developed empirically from representative samples of children, matching the United States population. Using milestones derived from the research literature rather than empirical procedures poses problems of validity.

Any timetable for development in early childhood must include an understanding of the normal variability in the age of acquisition of the skills being assessed (Lidz, 1977). Just as a point score on a scale is not completely descriptive of individual functioning, a developmental milestone must not be regarded as a fixed point in time, but rather as descriptive of a period of time that may be weeks, months, or years. Developmental milestones may be thought of as analogous to bands of confidence.

Developmental milestones are not cross-cultural. Child functioning is influenced by the family's social and nonsocial environments; thus tests do not reveal only within-child information, but also familial and cultural effects (Dunst, 1986). Assessment professionals must interpret the observed performance of children with reference to both established norms and familial and cultural factors.

Skills hierarchies. Skills hierarchies have been observed in every area of human achievement. However, the relationship of early skills to later skills and the extent to which these skills are prerequisites to later skills acquisition is not

always clear nor necessarily linear (Hamilton & Swan, 1981). Variability in skill development is frequently observed and may not be predictive of future school related problems.

Focus on intervention. Preschool children who are identified as having developmental problems may need early intervention. This need for early intervention is not necessarily indicative of a need for special education services in the future. In fact, early intervention frequently precludes the likelihood of later school problems (Keogh & Becker, 1973). The principal emphasis of early identification/assessment activities should not be on prognosis for future learning. Rather the focus should be on describing a child's current functioning. From this perspective, deficits observed in a young child are not necessarily correlated with later learning difficulties. Instead, they are viewed as possible impediments to developmental progress and skill acquisition during the early childhood years (Busch-Rossnagel, Hawryluk, & Pavon-Kennedy, 1983). Examples of the focus on normal development and current functioning may be found in curriculum-based developmental assessment and dynamic assessment.

Curriculum-based developmental assessment ties testing to instruction and evaluation of progress (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Capone, 1986; Neisworth & Bagnato, 1986). Dynamic assessment or process approaches often focus on response to instruction as a framework for diagnostic teaching as well as alternate techniques for identification of children needing special services (Hamilton, 1983; Lidz, 1983). These approaches stem from work in information processing and assess such functions as attention, stimulus detection, encoding, and decoding (Lidz, 1990).

Preschool assessment is enhanced by methods that combine normative- and criterion-referenced approaches (Neisworth & Bagnato, 1986). Preschool diagnosis should be based on assessments which are "multimeasure, multisource, multidomain, and multipurpose (Neisworth & Bagnato, 1986 p.180)". Additionally, more than one session is generally required to collect the information about the child.

Judgment-based assessment. A distinguishing characteristic of preschool assessment is the emphasis given to judgment-based assessment (Fleischer, Belgredan, Bagnato, & Ogonosky, 1990; LeLaurin, 1990), which is the collection and evaluation of perceptions of individuals who have contact with a young child across many settings. Measures and procedures developed to guide this process may lead to descriptive/qualitative or quantifiable results that show a high degree of congruence with traditional developmental assessment (Bagnato, 1984; Bagnato & Neisworth, 1985). Judgment-based assessment is also a valuable tool for examining behaviors and traits that are not easily

assessed in formal testing (Fleischer, et al., 1990). Judgment-based assessment ensures involvement in the assessor process (Brinckerhoff & Vincent, 1987; Kaiser & Woodman, 1985). However, third party information used in judgment-based assessment should not be a substitute for direct observation of the child. Judgment-based assessment is used as an additional source of information for decision-making.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRESCHOOL TESTS

Like all psychoeducational assessment instruments, preschool test should have representative norms, reliability, and validity. (See Vol. 1 Test Resource Guide).

Norms

Test norms must be representative of the group and relevant to the particular child with whom we are using a test. Test publishers frequently do not include young children in a normative sample although the publishers might propose the test's use with them. This common shortcoming forces us to observe additional cautions when reporting and using test results.

Reliability

Establishment of test reliability, the sine qua non of testing, is difficult with young children, as they do not necessarily exhibit the same behavior in repeated situations. If we cannot be sure of the consistency of a child's behavior, we cannot be certain the sample of behavior we obtained in testing reflects the child's typical behavior. Young children respond differently depending upon the characteristics of the setting, e.g., whether the room is familiar or not, whether a parent or caregiver is present or not, etc. The duration of the assessment and the time of day are also factors.

Although test publishers indicate that a specific instrument is appropriate for preschool children, publishers seldom include such young children in reliability studies.

Validity

Construct validity is often of particular concern for preschool tests because there is no common body of content, such as a curriculum, that we may expect preschool children to have mastered. In very young children there is an overlap and interrelationship of behavior so that discrete abilities are

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not usually observed. For example, adaptive behavior and cognitive processing cannot be clearly separated. Also language, motor, and cognitive development cannot be observed independently.

Because the development of preschool children is relatively undifferentiated, tests for preschoolers are likely to measure an aggregation of abilities which cannot generally be separated. Global constructs offer information that is useful in determining a child's needs for placement and/or assistance (Busch-Rossnagel, et al., 1983). Although the skills to be measured may be termed by publishers as "cognitive ability", "readiness", and the like, these terms do not refer to discrete abilities. The undifferentiated nature of preschool development coupled with a preventive perspective implies that non-categorical assessment is more appropriate for preschool age children than for children of school age.

The test user should be cautious of publisher recommendations to use an assessment device with preschool children when reported validity studies do not include young children.

Use of developmental milestones has been accepted as a guideline for appropriate early assessment (Busch-Rossnagel, et al., 1983). However, the specification as to what constitutes normal development is far from precise. Empirical research demonstrates that a multitude of factors influence the achievement of a developmental milestone. These factors range from biological influences (e.g., nutritional status) to familial and cultural influences. They include factors that must be considered in interpreting test scores. Although not an exhaustive list, the following characteristics should be noted by test users in explaining test results: affects, attitudes, beliefs, interests, personal and social needs, temperament, mechanisms of coping and defense, cognitive styles, and social values (Messick, 1984).

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Predictive validity. No single parameter of early achievement or behavior has been found to be a highly accurate predictor of later learning or behavior difficulties for individual children. Such problems in prediction can be attributed to several causes: (a) inadequacy of currently available measures for young children (Lindsay & Wedell, 1979); (b) variability which is characteristic of how children function (Lidz, 1977); and (c) the range of intra-child and environmental compensatory mechanisms about which little is known (Lewis, 1980).

Test Bias

Home, family, and environmental factors may preclude obtaining a valid score. If all children developed in identical environments, then developmental difficulties could be attributed to individual differences alone. But children do not have identical environments, so it is important to review each child's abilities and apparent deficits in relation to the demands of settings in which he/she is currently functioning and which he/she will encounter in the near future. Exceptionality is often defined in terms of the mismatch between the child's functioning, environmental influences and demands, and the developmental or skill hierarchy used as a reference in assessment (Faust, 1970). Test users need to examine carefully the information about the normative sample and test development procedures to determine the extent of differences between that sample and the individual child for whom test scores are reported. See Test Resource Guide, Vol. 1 for a more, general discussion of test bias.

Use of Tests with Second Language Learners and Culturally Diverse Populations

Proposed educational interventions based upon inferences derived from assessment procedures should be related to the experiential context of learning opportunities in the home, community, culture, and school of the child (Messick, 1984). The test user should be knowledgeable about the child's acculturation when determining whether to use test results quantitatively or qualitatively. For the latter, the child's family and cultural backgrounds, learning opportunities, primary language, and whatever other variables are relevant (i.e., familiarity with activities) need to be integrated with descriptive information on test performance.

In comparison to tests for school-aged students, many preschool tests have fewer verbal questions. This should not blind the assessment professional to linguistic diversity and how the child's comprehension of instructions in English impacts on how he/she carries out the tasks. Translation, even if only of instructions, alters the normative nature of the test in an unknown way.

Test Administration

A number of factors impacts upon the assessment professional's ability to obtain precise information about a preschooler from a test. A child's ability to take a test--his/her attention span and concentration -- is frequently a determinant of test scores. Although tests for young children are generally admin-

istered individually, rapport with an examiner alone cannot insure maximum performance. Efforts should be made to use interesting, challenging activities with children who are well-rested and without stress at the time of testing. More than one session is essential to obtain accurate information.

Use of Test Results

Tests yield information about the child's current functioning and results should not be used for prediction or prognosis. Similarly, discussions of readiness are inappropriate because terminology suggests future rather than current functioning. Given the psychometric problems as well as the diverse influences upon preschool children, it becomes clear that assessment for identification purposes should not focus on a unitary dimension of functioning. Significant conclusions about a child's ability must be multidimensional and based upon multiple sources, such as parents' and teachers' observations over time, and anecdotal and medical records, rather than reliance on a single test or battery of tests (Gibbs, 1990; Neisworth & Bagnato, 1986). Even these, in combination must be interpreted cautiously as indicators, not exact descriptions.

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