

**Tip Sheet # 6**  
**Assessment of Younger Children**  
Search Institute  
2008

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) offers a general rule for testing young children that we believe should be extended to include assessment for evaluation purposes:

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

Search Institute does not advise the assessment of young children (below grade 4) by using group-administered questionnaires or surveys, for a number of reasons:

1. The reading levels of these children can vary widely and it is possible that children may just guess at responses, making the data suspect.
2. It is challenging to assess some of the outcomes of interest related to positive youth development, using concepts and language that are understandable to early elementary children. Most school testing programs are assessing factual information and skills (reading, math), whereas the asset-based outcomes measured in these programs are focusing on higher-order knowledge, skills, and behaviors.
3. The responses of younger children are less stable. These children are influenced by immediate events and are less able, developmentally, to step back and give an overall response.
4. The assessments may seem like tests to younger children, which can add to their anxiety and stress. Children today are already subject to enough high-stakes testing in school each year.

Specific NAEYC guidelines support the use of more than just test scores for assessing young children. Perhaps we as caring adults should encourage children to begin thinking about their own positive development, especially to gain insight into how their own efforts can play an important role in their own success.

Of course, there are other methods for gathering data from younger children that are more valid and reliable than group administration of surveys. The following options provide a much better chance of yielding quality data from younger children:

1. Use direct observation of a sample of children using a standard protocol.

2. Ask knowledgeable adults (staff/parents) to rate particular child behaviors.
3. Focus on assessing the quality of the experience offered the child with the assumption that (a) if we know from research what quality is, and (b) it exists in the program being evaluated, then (c) positive outcomes for children should be expected to occur.
4. Individually assess a sample of children by either having a trained person reading questions and response options aloud to them, or by using a semi-structured interview format.
5. Work with children to create some individual portfolios that illustrate examples of and personal stories related to each asset category. From these, create a scoring rubric to use in evaluating individual levels of development. Combining these asset scores could also, then, be utilized to evaluate entire programs.
6. Involve children and their parents in setting a few individual goals related to positive youth development and then meet, periodically, to reflect on and rate their progress. These individual goals could also, then, be combined to provide a program evaluation measurement.

There is no simple answer. The options described above are all expensive, either because the measurement tool must be developed and/or the time it takes the staff to complete it.

### **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  
<http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/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>