

FACT SHEET ON TESTING AND YOUNG CHILDREN

In today's world, preschoolers, kindergartners, and children in the early elementary grades are required to take many tests throughout the school year. All this testing has had a negative impact on what and how children are taught, how they learn, and on their healthy development.¹ Children should have rich learning experiences in the early school years that allow for active, play-based experiential learning. They need opportunities to make friends and develop social skills, to develop creativity, the capacity for problem solving, and a love for learning. The increase in the use of tests with young children has led to more drill-based instruction of the specific skills tested. The most reliable approach to assessing young children's learning is through ongoing observations and individualized assessments by skilled teachers and assessments of children's work over time.

WHY TESTING IS HARMFUL TO YOUNG CHILDREN

- Testing narrows the curriculum.
 - ◇ Age appropriate and meaningful learning experiences may be reduced or eliminated and replaced by teaching narrow skills in order to “teach to the test.”
 - ◇ In teaching to the tests, many skills are taught in isolation and, therefore, have little or no meaning to children.²
 - ◇ Testing takes valuable time away from activities that are appropriate for young children and how they learn, such as building with blocks and other materials, open-ended art projects, and make-believe, imaginative play.¹
- When teaching focuses on testing, it may ignore or downplay children's age and stage of development, their interests, and the needs of individual differences among children.
 - ◇ Play and activity-based learning with concrete materials have been disappearing from many early childhood classrooms, and—along with them—children's natural motivation and deep engagement in high quality learning.¹
- Testing can cause stress and anxiety and “undermine children's belief that school is a safe and nurturing place where they can engage in meaningful learning.”³
- Testing may convince children that they are inadequate or “dumb,” especially when tested on materials that are developmentally inappropriate for their age and abilities.⁴
- Today's tests are often conducted on computers. However, child development experts warn against young children spending significant time on computers.⁵
 - ◇ Schools may be tempted to spend time training children how to use computer-based tests⁵—taking precious time away from appropriate curriculum and directing resources toward hardware and software instead of hands-on learning materials.³
 - ◇ Many tests use computer-based assessments, but there is a lack of research that computer-based testing is accurate when used with young children.^{6 7}

WHY TESTING IS NOT NEEDED

- Assessing young children is very different than assessing older children and adults.
 - ◇ Young children learn differently than older children and adults. “They construct knowledge in experiential, interactive, concrete, and hands-on ways rather than through abstract reasoning and paper and pencil activities alone.” Therefore, we must discover what young children know in ways other than the traditional written kinds of assessment.⁸
 - ◇ Tests given to children younger than eight often produce inaccurate or misleading results.⁹

- Young children develop in “unstandardized” ways.
 - ◇ Assessment is difficult during the early years as a young child’s development changes quickly, is irregular, and is influenced by the environment. Young children go through both periods of rapid growth and unhurried rest.⁸
 - ◇ Children develop in four areas—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—and not at the same pace through each.⁹
- Testing does not provide teachers with information about individual children that they need to assist them in teaching, including children’s cultural experiences or their individual interests, strengths, and needs.²
- Testing may place teachers in an ethical dilemma.¹⁰
 - ◇ Teachers strive never to harm children through “practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children.” Yet mandates for testing and preparing children to take tests may challenge teachers ethically.¹¹

GOOD ASSESSMENT PRACTICES WHEN WORKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

- Crucial to good assessment practices is observation over time (not just from a one-time test), including observation of the whole child (physical, cognitive, social, and emotional).
 - ◇ For many years, teachers have used assessments based on careful observations of children which help them understand each child’s development and design appropriate learning experiences and support for each child.³
- Besides observation, other good assessment practices include:
 - ◇ Checklists
 - ◇ Anecdotal records and running records (teachers write down objective reports of children’s behaviors and skills),
 - ◇ Portfolios (teachers collect work samples throughout the year)
 - ◇ Home inventories (parents report children’s behavior and skills at home),
 - ◇ Developmental screenings (checking for signs that a child may be delayed in one or more areas of development).⁸
- Teachers can use the information gained from the above assessments to understand and support children’s learning and development, to design their instruction, and to identify children who may need additional support or services.¹⁰
- Use bias-free assessments that consider the culture, language, family, and unique development of the child.¹²
- Include the assessment of teacher/student interactions, program assessments, and classroom environment, such as the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System, developed at the University of Virginia, <http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/castl/class>) or the NAEYC Accreditation System (www.naeyc.org).

¹ “Positon Statement on Standards and Testing for Young Children,” Defending the Early Years, 2013.

² “Teachers Speak Out: How School Reforms Are Failing Low-Income Children.” Levin and VanHoorn. Defending the Early Years, 2016.

³ “Straight Talk about Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.” Feeney. Defending the Early Years, 2016.

⁴ “Is Kindergarten too young to test?” KQED, Mind/Shift. Korbey. February 7, 2014.

⁵ American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement, October 2016.

⁶ “Using Computer-Based Testing with Young Children.” Barnes. James Madison University. February 10, 2010 retrieved on 1.16.17 http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1010&context=nera_2010

⁷ “Testing Kindergarten: Young Children Produce Data – Lots of Data.” McMahon, *Rethinking Schools*, Vol 24, Issue 2, Winter 2009/10.

⁸ “Assessing Young Children,” Guddemi and Wall. Pearson Education, Inc., 2004.

⁹ “Tips for Parents: When Kindergarten Testing is Out of Hand.” Alliance for Childhood, 2015.

¹⁰ “Standardized Testing in Kindergarten.” Feeney and Freeman, *Young Children*, March 2014.

¹¹ NAEYC’s Code of Ethical Conduct, May 2011.

¹² Positon Statement: Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation. 2003.