

on assessing young English language learners

The dramatic increase in cultural and linguistic diversity among children and families in early childhood programs requires urgent attention. One of the most pressing needs is to improve assessment practices for young English language learners.

All young children have the right to be assessed in ways that support their learning and development. For children whose home language is not English, this means being assessed in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. A number of obstacles cause assessment practices and policies for these children to be ineffective; foremost are the lack of appropriate assessment tools and the scarcity of well prepared bilingual, bicultural practitioners.

The following recommendations, with specific indicators of effective practice, are intended to help policy makers, program administrators, teachers, and others improve screening and assessment practices for young English language learners.

Recommendations and indicators

1. Using screening and assessment for appropriate purposes

As with assessment of all young children, assessment of young English language learners should be guided by specific, beneficial purposes, with appropriate adaptations to meet the needs of children whose home language is not English.

- Young English language learners are regularly screened using linguistically and culturally appropriate screening tools. Results of screenings are used to determine what further supports and services are needed.
- Assessments of young English language learners are used primarily to understand and improve children's learning; to track, monitor, and support development in all areas, including language development; and to identify disabilities or other special needs.

- Young English language learners are included in program evaluation and accountability systems, and culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment instruments and procedures are used. Inclusion of English language learners in accountability systems never acts as a disincentive for programs to serve English language learners.

2. Culturally and linguistically appropriate assessments

In assessing young English language learners, great emphasis should be given to the alignment of assessment tools and procedures with the specific cultural and linguistic characteristics of the children being assessed.

- All screenings and assessments used with young English language learners are culturally appropriate.
- All screenings and assessments used with young English language learners are linguistically appropriate.
- Translations of English language instruments are carefully reviewed for linguistic and cultural appropriateness by native speakers well versed in the complex issues of assessment and translation.

Projections indicate that by 2030, 40 percent of school-age children will have a home language other than English.

3. Significant assessment decisions involve two or more professionals

The primary purpose of assessing young English language learners should be to help programs support their learning and development; classroom-based assessment should maximize the value of the results for teachers' curriculum planning and teaching strategies.

- Programs rely on systematic observational assessments, using culturally and linguistically appropriate tools as the primary source of guidance to inform instruction and to improve outcomes for young English language learners.

- Assessments for young English language learners are based on multiple methods and measures.
- Assessments are ongoing; special attention is given to repeated assessments of language development over time.
- Assessments involve two or more people.
- Assessments are age appropriate.

4. Using standardized formal assessments

The development of state and other accountability systems has led to increased use of standardized formal assessments of young children. Specific considerations about the development and interpretation of these assessments should guide their use with young English language learners.

- It is appropriate to use standardized formal assessments to identify disabilities or other special needs, and for program evaluation and accountability purposes. They may also contribute to monitoring and improving learning at an individual level as part of a more comprehensive approach to the assessment of young English language learners.
- Decision makers and those conducting assessments are aware of the concerns and cautions associated with using standardized formal assessments with young English language learners.
- Decision makers and test developers carefully attend to test development issues, including equivalence and norming.
- Decision makers and those conducting assessments know appropriate conditions for using and interpreting standardized formal assessments with young English language learners.

5. Characteristics of those conducting assessments

Whatever the purpose of the assessment, those conducting assessments of young English language learners should have cultural and linguistic competence, knowledge of the children being assessed, and specific, assessment-related knowledge and skills.

- It is primarily teachers who assess young English language learners, but paraprofessionals, assessment assistants, and specialized consultants also play an important role.
- Those assessing young English language learners are bilingual and bicultural.
- They know the child.
- They are knowledgeable about language acquisition, including second language acquisition.
- They are trained in and knowledgeable about assessment in general and about considerations in the assessment of young English language learners in particular.

6. The role of family in the assessment of young English language learners

Families of young English language learners should play critical roles in the assessment process, being closely involved in a variety of appropriate ways.

- Professionals involved in the assessment of young English language learners seek information and insight from family members in selecting, conducting, and interpreting assessments.
- Programs refrain from using family members to conduct formal assessments, interpret during formal assessments, or draw assessment conclusions.
- Professionals involved in assessment regularly inform and update families on their child's assessment results in a way that is easily understood and meaningful.

7. Needs in the field

Resources should be invested to expand the knowledge base; develop more and better assessments; increase the number of bilingual, bicultural professionals; and create professional development opportunities in effective assessment of young English language learners.

- Scholars provide an expanded knowledge base about second language acquisition and the development of young English language learners.
- More and better assessments are developed to meet the most pressing needs.
- Policy makers, institutions of higher education, and programs adopt policies and practices to recruit and retain a diverse early childhood workforce, with a focus on increasing the number of bilingual and bicultural early childhood professionals.
- Early childhood professionals, including program administrators, receive ongoing opportunities for professional development and support in the area of assessing young English language learners.

The complete supplement is available at www.naeyc.org/positionstatements. The 2003 position statement on early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation can be found at the same website.

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