

Parental Perceptions on an Alternative Assessment of Young Children with Special Needs: An Activity-Based Approach

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Abstract

There is a growing consensus in the field of early childhood special education that more alternative assessment procedures need to be used for determining eligibility for services of young children. The perceptions of 30 parents about the ability of an activity-based assessment and a traditional, norm-referenced test to assess the functional skills of young children with special needs and to measure parent satisfaction in their participation during the assessment were studied. Caregiver Assessment Questionnaire on functional skills and parent satisfaction was used to generate parental perceptions. Findings revealed that parents perceived the activity-based assessment to be significantly more able to assess the functional skills of young children with special needs, and to provide parental satisfaction in their participation during the assessment procedure than a traditional standardized assessment.

Current assessment procedures for determining eligibility of young children with special needs for early intervention services present major challenges for professionals and parents in the field of early childhood special education. Researchers have noted that current standardized, norm-referenced tests are not individualized to meet each child's special needs, do not consider the dynamic developmental nature of young children, fail to measure functional skills in the natural environment, and allow little parental involvement in

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the assessment process (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Munson, 1989; Barnett, MacMann, & Carey, 1992; Bricker, 1993; Greenspan & Meisels, 1994; McLean, Bailey, & Wolery, 1996; Neisworth & Bagnato, 1992). As a result of both the urgings of early childhood researchers and educators as well as parent advocacy, alternative assessment approaches are being studied in the methods and styles of early childhood assessment. Such assessment must enable teaming with parents, measure functional skills of children and thus link to programming, instructional planning.

Lack of Family Participation During the Decision-Making Process

According to P. L. 99-457, family participation is required during the assessment and evaluation of the child. The clear intent of this federal legislation is that families are to be part of the IFSP team. In practice, however, parents typically are not included as members of the assessment team (Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994; Kjerland & Kovach, 1990). If families are involved in the assessment process, their role most often is to give informed consent for the evaluation to be conducted by professionals (Bailey et al., 1986; Krauss & Jacobs, 1990). At most, families may be asked to provide a developmental history or describe the child's home behavior. Families typically are not involved until the IFSP conference, at which time the results of the professionals' evaluations are presented to them (Johnson, McGonigel, & Kaufmann, 1989; Kjerland & Kovach, 1990). Participation at this level does not allow families the opportunity to provide insights to professionals on child's ability and disposition, set priorities for their children, or help to guide the assessment process. If families are to play a significant role, as required by P. L. 99-457, their participation and collaboration can be maximized by involving them from the beginning of the assessment process (Benner, 1992; Diamond & Squires, 1993; Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988; Squires, Nickel, & Bricker, 1990).

Lack of Functional Information

Standardized, norm-referenced tests that are frequently used to determine eligibility have been developed to identify and discriminate categories of disabilities among groups of children (McLean, Bailey, & Wolery, 1996). These measures provide information on the child's current level of functioning, usually by providing an overall score (e.g., IQ or DQ). The results of many eligibility assessments have little usefulness since they do not offer much information other than scores, labels, or diagnostic, deficit-oriented descrip-