

Guidelines for Preschool Psychological Assessment in New York State

New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP)

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The New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP) defines part of its mission as improving standards for practice and training in school psychology. Following changes in legislation mandating preschool special education and early childhood services (IDEA 1990), many school psychologists in New York State are now increasingly involved with assessment, educational planning, and interventions for preschool children. The public school district's contact with preschoolers with disabilities may also increase with the enactment of New York State's Universal Prekindergarten Program (1997), which has program goals for integrating preschool children with disabilities into prekindergarten settings.

School psychologists are broadly trained in child development, learning and cognition, educational foundations, mental health, and family functioning, which lead to their professional activities of assessment, intervention, consultation, and collaboration. However, many school psychologists have not had the opportunity to apply these skills with children under the age of five (Kaplinski, Lidz & Rosenfield, 1992; Miranda & Andrews, 1991). In addition, there are differences between systems of service delivery and regulations for assessment of preschoolers and school age children. Therefore the purposes of this paper are to: (a) reiterate the New York State regulations regarding preschool assessment; (b) provide guidelines to answering questions regarding appropriate assessment for preschoolers and; (c) provide guidelines for ensuring ethical conduct and best professional practice.

Who is Considered a Preschool Child?

Special education services in New York State are organized into three age groups. Children from birth to approximately three years old may receive Early Intervention (EI) services provided through New York State Department of Health. Preschool services, provided through the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE), address the needs of children from ages three to approximately five, or until they are first eligible to attend Kindergarten. Preschool services may be provided to children at age two and a half who have been in the Early Intervention program. Services for school-aged children

begin when they are first eligible for Kindergarten and extend through age 21. These services are provided through the Committee on Special Education (CSE).

New York State Part 200 Regulations of the Commissioner Defining Assessment

According to the Part 200 regulations, a preschool child referred to the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) due to suspected disability in one or more areas must receive an individual evaluation. The components of an individual evaluation are specified below:

200.4 (b)(1) An individual evaluation of the referred student shall be initiated by a committee on special education and shall include, at no cost to the parent, at least:

- (i) a physical examination in accordance with the provisions of sections 903, 904, and 905 of the Education Law;
- (ii) an individual psychological evaluation, except where a school psychologist determines after an assessment of a school-age student, pursuant to paragraph (2) of this subdivision, that further evaluation is unnecessary;
- (iii) a social history; and
- (iv) other appropriate assessments or evaluations as necessary to ascertain the physical, mental, and emotional factors which contribute to the suspected disabilities.

According to this regulation, a school psychologist may assess a child of school age and determine that further psychological evaluation is unnecessary. For a preschool child there is no such exception given; **a preschool child must receive an individual psychological evaluation.** The Part 200 definition of an individual psychological evaluation follows:

200.1 (w) Individual psychological evaluation means a process by which a New York State certified school psychologist or licensed psychologist uses, to the extent deemed necessary for purposes of educational planning, a variety of psychological and educational techniques and examinations in the student's dominant language, to study and describe a student's developmental, learning, behavioral, and other personality characteristics.

What Is An Appropriate Preschool Psychological Evaluation?

A New York State Education Department Memorandum published in May 1993 (Nevelidine, 1993) provided direction for planning individual evaluations of preschool children.

The individual evaluation of a preschool child who is suspected of having a disability must include information pertaining to functional areas related to cognitive, language

and communicative, adaptive, social-emotional or motor development in order to determine the child's individual needs as expressed on the individualized education program (IEP). Information must be obtained from a physical examination, an individual psychological evaluation, a social history, a parent interview, a structured observation of the child's performance and behavior and other assessment procedures as necessary to ascertain specific factors contributing to the suspected disability.

These procedures may include, but are not limited to, norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced instruments, developmental checklists, teacher reports and other test results of the child. The amended regulations require that such evaluation must be individually administered, provided in the child's dominant language, not be dependent on a single procedure, administered by a multidisciplinary team, and be consistent with all other requirements found in Section 200.4(b)(1-4) of the Regulations of the Commissioner. All available information about the child must be reviewed and considered in comparison to accepted milestones of child development.

The psychological evaluation is one part of the multidisciplinary evaluation, which must address all functional areas (cognitive, language and communication, adaptive, social-emotional and motor development). The regulations allow wide latitude in planning for an appropriate preschool evaluation, including allowing the evaluation team to decide which members will assess which functional areas. The psychological evaluation should thus be tailored to the individual needs and assessment questions presented by the child; in essence a flexible approach to assessment should be adopted. No one assessment method, and certainly no one test or set battery of tests, is appropriate for all children. Because most evaluations which are conducted in response to a CPSE referral are concerned with qualification for services, these evaluations will not be as fine-grained as those used for designing specific intervention programs and gauging progress (Batsche & Knoff, 1995). Nonetheless, using tools and procedures which can link to intervention planning is encouraged (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Munson, 1989). An extensive discussion of the various preschool assessment tools is beyond the scope of this paper, but can be found in Alfonso and Flanagan (1999), McLean, Bailey and Wolery (1996), and Bracken (1991).

What Competencies Are Needed for Appropriate Preschool Assessment?

Psychologists conducting evaluations for preschool children should understand early development, family functioning, and team functioning within the educational context. Certified school psychologists have training in essential assessment skills such as knowledge of psychometric methods and their limitations, skills in working with parents, observational skills, understanding of typical and atypical development, and linking assessment to intervention (Preator & McAllister, 1995). However, further training and experience with young children is highly recommended for preschool practice. In a jointly authored position paper, the School Psychology Educator's Council of New York State & New York Association of School Psychologists (Lidz et. al., 1999) suggest that psychologists draw from competencies in the following areas in designing an evaluation

of a young child:

developmental assessment	standardized cognitive assessment	dynamic assessment
family-systems assessment	curriculum-based assessment	ratings scales
play-based assessment	ecological assessment	naturalistic and systematic observations
interview instruments/techniques	archival assessment	

Who Can Conduct a Preschool Psychological Evaluation?

New York's model for preschool assessment utilizes evaluation providers who are approved by the New York State Education Department. Often community agencies (e.g. Association for Retarded Children, BOCES) are approved preschool evaluation providers.

Public schools are not automatically preschool evaluators, unless they apply for, and are granted approval. The Article 89 regulation pertaining to approved preschool evaluators is cited below.

Art. 89, Sect. 4410, subdivision 9

(a) A school district or a group of appropriately licensed and/or certified professionals associated with a public or private agency may apply to the commissioner for approval as an evaluator ... Such application shall include, but not be limited to, a description of the multi-disciplinary evaluation services proposed to be provided and a demonstration that all agency employees and staff who provide such evaluation services shall have appropriate licensure and/or certification and that the individual who shall have direct supervision responsibilities over such staff shall have appropriate level of experience in providing evaluation or services to preschool or kindergarten-aged children with handicapping conditions.

As previously cited in Part 200.1(w), the appropriate professional providing the psychological evaluation must be either a licensed psychologist or certified school psychologist. Article 153 of New York State Education law regulates the profession of psychology and limits nonlicensed psychologists (such as certified school psychologists) to practice only as salaried employees in exempt settings, which are defined as chartered elementary or secondary schools, or federal, state, county, or municipal agencies. Therefore a certified school psychologist, who is not also a licensed psychologist, is prohibited from independent contracting with agencies which may be approved preschool evaluators, and may perform such services only as a salaried employee in an exempt setting. School psychology interns may assist certified school psychologists in conducting preschool evaluations in exempt settings, but the supervising school psychologist carries ultimate responsibility for the details of the individual evaluation, and must observe and interact with the child for a sufficient amount of time to allow the supervisor to reach an independent conclusion regarding the child's performance (Freeborne, 1984).

Once a child has been referred to the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE), parents select an approved evaluation provider from a list maintained by their school district. The evaluation results are reviewed at a formal meeting by the CPSE. If a preschool student is determined to be eligible for special education programs and services, this meeting is the basis for IEP development. In contrast to the Committee on Special Education (CSE) for school-age children, the school psychologist is not a mandated member of the CPSE. Certified school psychologists in some school districts are involved in chairing the CPSE or as the school district representative who is responsible for interpreting instructional implications of the evaluation results.

The model of utilizing approved evaluators outside the local school district results in an increased need to coordinate efforts with approved evaluators and agencies providing preschool services. Generally, service delivery is enhanced if local district evaluators and staff are involved with evaluating the needs and planning for interventions for preschool students.

What Is Considered a Disability for a Preschool Child?

New York State regulations (Part 200, May 1998 revision) specify the following criteria for determining whether a child meets the definition of a preschool student with a disability:

200.1 (ee) Commencing July 1, 1993 to be identified as having a disability a preschool student shall either:

(i) exhibit a significant delay or disorder in one of more functional areas related to cognitive, language and communicative, adaptive, socio-emotional or motor development which adversely affects the student's ability to learn. Such delay or disorder shall be documented by the results of the individual evaluation which includes but is not limited to information in all functional areas obtained from a structured observation of a student's performance and behavior, a parental interview and other individually administered assessment procedures, and, when reviewed in combination and compared to accepted milestones for child development, indicate:

(a) a 12 month delay in one or more functional areas; or

(b) a 33 percent delay in one functional area, or a 25 percent delay in each of two functional areas; or

(c) if appropriate standardized instruments are individually administered in the evaluation process, a score of 2.0 standard deviations below the mean in one functional area, or a score of 1.5 standard deviations below the mean in each of two functional areas; or

(ii) meet the criteria of autistic, deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing, orthopedically impaired, other health-impaired, traumatic brain-injured, or visually impaired as described in Section 200.1 (mm) of the Regulations.

This definition is designed to promote a noncategorical model for qualifying young children for special services, in contrast to the establishment of specific disabilities, as was required prior to 1993. Note that the disability categories of emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, mentally retarded, multiply disabled, and speech impaired are not utilized at the preschool level. The eligibility criteria are designed to prevent premature identification of young children as having disabilities which may be difficult to establish at the preschool level.

In establishing the presence of delays, either standard scores (expressed in standard deviations below the mean) or age equivalent scores are allowable. While age equivalent scores convey a readily understood comparison to accepted milestones for child development, they must be interpreted with caution. Psychometric problems such as ordinal scaling, use of interpolation and extrapolation in constructing age equivalents, and variations in development at different ages and across skills limit the interpretability of age equivalents (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1998). Therefore if norm-referenced tests have been used, then standard scores are a more appropriate method of interpretation.

How Often Must a Preschool Child Be Evaluated?

Annual reviews of preschool students with disabilities are required, just as they are for school age children. At the annual review information about the child's educational needs, individualized education program, services, and progress are evaluated and recommended for continuation or modification as needed. A psychological re-evaluation could be requested to assist the CPSE in determining the student's individual

needs, educational progress and achievement, and the student's continued eligibility for special education.

The NYS regulations do not specify frequency for preschool psychological assessments, and the triennial evaluations could satisfy re-evaluation requirement. Yet it is prudent and appropriate practice to re-evaluate young children frequently. Young children demonstrate a great deal of variability in their rates of maturation and acquisition of skills, and especially in their attention and motivation during testing (Neisworth & Bagnato, 1992). Since the resulting predictive validity of preschool tests is quite weak, frequent reassessment is needed to provide a current picture of the young child's functioning. In addition, if a young child has been receiving intervention services, the developmental picture may be changing rapidly.

A preschooler's transition to school-age programming requires not only reassessment of needs, but planning for services and programs within a new service system. A psychological re-evaluation may be needed by the CSE to determine the appropriate handicapping condition for the child who is entering the school-age special education service system, and has previously been identified with the noncategorical CPSE designation of A preschooler with a disability. **As a member of the CSE, the district school psychologist should be encouraged to take an active role in the transition process, and may determine that a current psychological evaluation of a child entering the district from the CPSE is appropriate and necessary.**

What Should I Do If I Encounter Possible Inappropriate or Unethical Practice?

The majority of approved evaluating agencies are following the regulations regarding appropriate preschool assessment performed by properly trained and salaried psychologists. However, there may be instances where state regulations and best practices have been overlooked or misinterpreted. When questions about professional practice and ethical conduct arise, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP) will be invaluable resources.

The NASP Principles for Ethical Practice (1997) and NYASP Ethics and Professional Standards Manual (1996) give clear steps to take when faced with possible inappropriate, uninformed, or unethical practice. The first step is to attempt to resolve the situation informally. A collaborative approach aimed at sharing information and clarifying appropriate practice is likely to be welcomed. For example, a misunderstanding of regulations or procedures could be resolved by an informal conversation with a practitioner. Next, consulting with colleagues and seeking information and advice from relevant professional organizations, such as NASP or NYASP, will help to clarify the nature of perceived violations and to determine a course of action. Utilization of the committee review process for eligibility decisions can also help promote appropriate practice. For example, the Committee on Preschool Special Education has authority to accept or to reject evaluations. When an evaluation does not conform with regulations or appropriate practice, the CPSE may decide to ask for another, or a more complete, evaluation. These steps should be taken prior to consideration of filing a formal complaint with the State Education Department, or with the appropriate credentialing body or professional organization.

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