

# Early Childhood Assessment

Carol S. Lidz



WILEY

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**Carol S. Lidz**



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Published simultaneously in Canada.

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:**

Lidz, Carol Schneider.

Early childhood assessment / Carol S. Lidz.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-471-41984-2 (alk. paper)

1. Behavioral assessment of children. 2. Psychological tests for children. 3. Observation (Psychology)—Methodology. I. Title.

BF722.3 .L53 2002

155.42'3'0287—dc21

2002028827

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# *Early Childhood Assessment*



*This book is dedicated to the individuals who have played a direct role  
in providing me with the opportunities to work with preschool children  
and to gain whatever level of expertise I can now claim  
that gave me the courage (OK, chutzpah) to write this book.*

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## ◆ *Acknowledgments*

After many years of working in school systems with school-age children, my first opportunity to work intensively with preschool children was at Moss Rehabilitation Hospital, when the psychology department was under the direction of Phillip Spergel. Phil assigned me to the pediatric unit, where I had the good fortune to work with the large number of children brought to Moss through a contract with the Get Set day care program of the Philadelphia Board of Education. It was through this work that I discovered I really enjoyed working with this age group and that I also discovered the limited information that was available at the time. Thanks, Phil.

For the following five years, I worked at Hall-Mercer Community Mental Health/Mental Retardation Center of Pennsylvania Hospital, where I was assigned to consult with the therapeutic nursery program. This was under the clinical directorship of Carl Gasta, who, sadly, died a number of years ago.

I was next hired by Bill Dibble, the associate director of United Cerebral Palsy Association of Philadelphia and Vicinity to create and direct the (then) Head Start Clinic Team. For over eight years I was the administrator and senior psychologist for this team, which provided a model for services to children with special needs throughout the Philadelphia area. This was also my first opportunity to carry out research as an applied psychologist. Thanks, Bill.

Following my work with the Clinic Team (though continuing there on a part-time basis—not being able to let the baby go!), I was introduced to academia by Sylvia Rosenfield, who invited me to be the coordinator of her grant for an early childhood specialization with Temple University's School Psychology Program. This was my first opportunity to teach the preschool assessment course, where I consistently overwhelmed students with the large number of hand-outs because there was no satisfactory text at that time. Thanks, Sylvia (and my apologies to my students; you can buy this book now!).

My final thanks go to H. Carl Haywood, who by inviting me to design and direct the School Psychology Program within the newly created Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Touro College, provided me with continued opportunities to teach and develop the preschool assessment course, as well as to conduct research related to my work with dynamic assessment and parent-child interactions with young children. (The students there also complained about the workload. My apologies also to you. This is one response to the yet unasked question of what the Temple and Touro programs have in common. You, too, may buy this book!) Thanks (again), Carl.

Of course I must express gratitude to the wonderful children and families, as well as the teachers and supervisors, with whom I have had the privilege of working over these many years. My special thanks to the darling children of the Head Start programs throughout Philadelphia. We will never really know how we touched each other's lives.

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## ◆ *Preface*

This is a book for practitioners by a practitioner. This is a book for academics by an academic. No, I am not having an identity crisis. I stand with my feet firmly planted in both worlds. Primarily, this is a book I need for teaching my graduate students in school psychology, and it is the book I wish I had had when I began my work as a school psychologist.

There are other books that tackle the topic of assessment of preschool children, but while I have used them as references and greatly value their content, I never selected any of them as a text for my course in early childhood assessment. The books that are available focus on specific tests, are organized according to disability, or commit to one specific model. To my amazement, some of these omit in-depth discussions of play, parent-child interaction, and dynamic assessment. Because most of them are edited volumes, there is inevitable redundancy across chapters. The greatest limitation is that it is difficult for practitioners to walk away from these books feeling as if they were put on the road to application of the content. Although any book is limited in its ability to prepare practitioners for practice, there remains a gap in the availability of a book that focuses primarily on such applications.

The purpose of this book is to provide general guidelines for designing and conducting assessments of young children between the ages of 3 through 5 years: the preschool years. Although details are provided regarding some informal procedures (e.g., interviews, observations), specific standardized procedures are mentioned only briefly, with more space dedicated to issues regarding their administration and application. Similarly, this book does not cover specific disorders. However, to say that this book offers general guidelines is not to imply that it avoids specifics. Some areas neglected by other books are described in detail, such as parent-child interaction and dynamic assessment, and other areas, such as interviews and observations, are detailed with forms and formats unique to this text. Another important aspect of this book is that it offers an integrated discussion and format for assessment of young children. Each chapter offers discussion of a specialized topic, but always with awareness of content in other chapters, and always with a sense of moving toward an integrated application of procedures to the whole child.

This book is appropriate as a graduate school text in school or clinical psychology and for practitioners who either have never received formal training in the assessment of young children or wish to review and update their thinking and practices in this area. To facilitate the use of this book with graduate students, suggested activities are listed at the end of each chapter under the headings of scholarship and application. Course instructors can use these suggestions as they wish, for example, by asking students to select one or more scholarship and application activity from among the chapters to fulfill course requirements.

This book also expresses an attitude and a commitment to the idea that best assessment practices should reflect what is good for families and for children and not just what is fast and cheap to implement. Of course, there are economic realities that must be faced, but we have an ethical obligation to resist and to protest against practices that threaten to cheat our clients of effective and meaningful services and interventions.

This book walks the reader through a comprehensive assessment, touching each of the major data sources necessary for a full understanding of children and their environments. It is

organized primarily in terms of these data sources, rather than in terms of diagnostic category, functional domain, or specific procedure. Assessment is a complex process, and any procedure generates information that crosses domains. There is no such thing as a purely cognitive or purely social-emotional measure. Although it may be helpful to divide the discussion into functional domains when assembling a final report, during the course of the assessment the psychologist must first parse out the information from each procedure to decide what that procedure is measuring at that time for that child, and ask the question: What did I learn about this child from what I just did? Only in this way can we put Humpty-Dumpty back together again and give meaning to our statements about the whole child.

Assessment is a journey. We begin with an idea of where we want to go and carry a map to guide the way, but we can never predict what we meet along the way or exactly how that will affect the point at which we arrive. This text attempts to provide a map that reflects the richness and complexity of children's development and the lives they live within their communities and families. The journey never fails to be interesting and challenging for those whose eyes and minds are open. Welcome to the world of early childhood assessment.



# *Early Childhood Assessment*



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## ◆ *Contents*

	<b>Supplementary Materials</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>In the Beginning . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
	Interviewing	4
	Developmental History	11
	Screening	12
	Risk and Resilience	23
	Assessment	26
	Summary	33
	Suggested Activities	34
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Observing Children, Programs, and Teachers</b>	<b>35</b>
	Issues of Observation	36
	Observing Children	38
	Observing Programs	44
	Observing Teachers	45
	Limitations	52
	Summary	53
	Suggested Activities	53
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Families, Homes, and Cultural Contexts</b>	<b>54</b>
	The Family as a System	54
	Parenting a Child with Special Needs	56
	Cultural Issues	58
	Conducting a Family Interview	59
	Caregiver-Child Interactions	61
	Some Concluding Thoughts	79
	Summary	79
	Suggested Activities	79
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Assessment of Play</b>	<b>80</b>
	Relevance of Play	80
	Historical Perspective	81
	Characteristics of Play	82
	Exploration versus Play	83
	Developmental Aspects of Play	84
	Children with Disabilities	86
	Assessment of Play	87

	Suggested Guidelines for Observing Play	88
	General Assessment Considerations	93
	Summary	94
	Suggested Activities	94
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Development-, Curriculum-, and Performance-Based Assessment</b>	<b>95</b>
	Standards	99
	Specific Procedures	100
	Le Plus Ça Change . . .	110
	Summary	110
	Suggested Activities	111
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Dynamic Assessment</b>	<b>112</b>
	Definition and Characteristics	113
	Historical-Theoretical Roots	114
	Prevailing Models	114
	A Generic Approach to Curriculum-Based Dynamic Assessment	117
	The Application of Cognitive Functions Scale	129
	Some Editorial Remarks	130
	Summary	131
	Suggested Activities	132
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Standardized Testing</b>	<b>133</b>
	Examples of Standardized Tests for Young Children	136
	Standardized Testing and Issues of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity	151
	Concluding Comments	153
	Summary	154
	Suggested Activities	154
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Social-Emotional Functioning</b>	<b>155</b>
	Social-Emotional Development	156
	Temperament	167
	Adaptive Behavior and Coping	172
	Peer Relations	178
	Functional Behavior Assessment	187
	Summary	190
	Suggested Activities	191
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>The Neuropsychological Functioning of Young Children</b>	<b>192</b>
	The “Neuro” in Neuropsychological Assessment	193
	The Mental Status Exam	194
	Neuropsychological Assessment of Young Children	195
	Luria’s Contributions	198

	Five Important Points	199
	Electrophysiological Procedures	202
	Implications for Assessment	203
	Summary	203
	Suggested Activities	204
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>Assembling, Reporting, and Evaluating the Pieces</b>	<b>205</b>
	Writing Reports	205
	Linking Assessment with Intervention	227
	Communicating with Teachers and Parents	232
	Evaluating the Effectiveness of Interventions	236
	Final Thoughts	240
	Summary	240
	Suggested Activities	240
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>National Association of School Psychologists Position Statement on Early Childhood Assessment</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>Appendix B</b>	<b>New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP) Guidelines for Preschool Psychological Assessment in New York State</b>	<b>245</b>
<b>Appendix C</b>	<b>Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children Position Paper on Developmental Delay as an Eligibility Category</b>	<b>252</b>
<b>Appendix D</b>	<b>National Association for the Education of Young Children Position Paper: Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity: Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education</b>	<b>254</b>
	<i>References</i>	<b>267</b>
	<i>Author Index</i>	<b>295</b>
	<i>Subject Index</i>	<b>305</b>
	<i>About the Author</i>	<b>313</b>

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## ◆ *Supplementary Materials*

### Tests Reviewed

Test Review 1.1	Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ): A Parent-Completed Child-Monitoring System—Second Edition (1999)	16
Test Review 1.2	Denver Developmental Screening Test—II (1990)	17
Test Review 1.3	Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning—Third Edition (DIAL-3) (1998)	18
Test Review 1.4	Early Screening Inventory—Revised (1997)	19
Test Review 1.5	AGS Early Screening Profiles (ESP) (1990)	20
Test Review 1.6	FirstSTEP: Screening Test for Evaluating Preschoolers (1993)	21
Test Review 5.1	AEPS Measurement for Three to Six Years	103
Test Review 5.2	Boehm-3 Preschool/Boehm Test of Basic Concepts—Third Edition (2001)	104
Test Review 5.3	Bracken Basic Concept Scale—Revised (1998)	105
Test Review 5.4	Learning Accomplishment Profile—Diagnostic Standardized Assessment (LAP-D) (1992)	107
Test Review 5.5	Developmental Tasks for Kindergarten Readiness-II (DTKR II) (1994)	108
Test Review 7.1	Bayley Scales of Infant Development: Second Edition (1993)	137
Test Review 7.2	Cognitive Abilities Scale: Second Edition (CAS-2) (2001)	138
Test Review 7.3	Differential Ability Scales (DAS) (1990)	139
Test Review 7.4	Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children (K-ABC) (1983)	141
Test Review 7.5	Leiter International Performance Scale—Revised (1997)	142
Test Review 7.6	McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities (1972)	145
Test Review 7.7	Mullen Scales of Early Learning: AGS Edition (1995)	146
Test Review 7.8	Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales—Fifth Edition (2003)	148
Test Review 7.9	Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (2003)	149
Test Review 7.10	Woodcock-Johnson, Third Edition (WJ-III) (2150)	150
Test Review 8.1	Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) (1999)	161
Test Review 8.2	Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social Emotional (ASQ:SE) (2002)	162
Test Review 8.3	Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) (1998)	164
Test Review 8.4	The Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) (1986)	165
Test Review 8.5	Conners' Rating Scales (1990)	166
Test Review 8.6	The Temperament Assessment Battery for Children (TABC) (1988)	170
Test Review 8.7	The Temperament and Atypical Behavior Scale: Early Childhood Indicators of Developmental Dysfunction (TABS) (1999)	171
Test Review 8.8	Scales of Independent Behavior—Revised (SIB-R) (1990)	175
Test Review 8.9	Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (VABS) (1984); Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Classroom Edition (1985)	176

Test Review 8.10	Coping Inventory: A Measure of Adaptive Behavior (1985)	177
Test Review 8.11	Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (PKBS) (1994)	182
Test Review 8.12	Social Competence and Behavior Evaluation: Preschool Edition (SCBE) (1995)	183
Test Review 8.13	Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) (1990)	184

## Forms

Form 1.1	Intake Interview	5
Form 1.2	Referral for Services	28
Form 1.3	Referral Profile	30
Form 2.1	Preobservation Teacher-Parent Questionnaire	40
Form 2.2	Observation Recording Sheet	41
Form 2.3	Guidelines for Observing Teaching Interactions	46
Form 3.1	Mediated Learning Experience Rating Scale	63
Form 3.2	Mediated Learning Experience Rating Scale—Parent (Self-Rating) Edition	69
Form 4.1	Object Play Observation Guide	90
Form 6.1	Instruction-Related Process Analysis	119
Form 6.2	Planning for Dynamic Assessment Mediation	122
Form 6.3	Response to Mediation Scale	124
Form 8.1	Behavior Observation Rating Scale	158
Form 8.2	Guidelines for Describing the Complex Peer Play of Preschool Children	181
Form 9.1	Guidelines for Neuropsychological Referral	196
Form 10.1	Suggested Format for Psychoeducational Assessments Reports	207
Form 10.2	Service Satisfaction Form	234

## Tables

Table 1.1	Assessment Sequence	27
Table 2.1	Elaborations and Examples of Components of Mediated Learning Experiences	51
Table 4.1	Developmental Progression of Play Behaviors	85
Table 10.1	Guidelines for Pain Reduction in Report Writing and for Generating Meaningful Reports	228
Table 10.2	Sample Goal Attainment Scale	238
Table 10.3	Goal Attainment Scale: Career Evaluation	239

**Figures**

Figure 3.1	Eco Map	55
Figure 6.1	Flowchart for Curriculum-Based Dynamic Assessment	117

**Reports**

Report 10.1	(Max)	209
Report 10.2	(Carl)	213
Report 10.3	(Peter)	217
Report 10.4	(Richard)	221

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# *Chapter One*

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## *In the Beginning . . .*

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Prior to the 1960s, few psychologists conducted assessments of preschool children. Before this time, early childhood assessment was largely an activity for researchers and, particularly, for those engaged in longitudinal studies. With the 1960s the government established federally funded compensatory education programs such as Head Start and acknowledged the need to determine their effectiveness (Kelly & Surbeck, 2000). Programs for young children with and without special needs now abound, and psychologists are expected to be skilled in their assessment. It is increasingly clear that special skills and a knowledge base are necessary for the proper assessment of young children and that psychologists are not adequately prepared by merely including tests for young children within the general cognitive education course or through continuing education courses. This text provides guidelines for the challenging and interesting journey into early childhood assessment.

A good journey begins with an itinerary, and a good itinerary balances careful preplanning with opportunities for exploration and spontaneous adventure. This is the goal of this introductory chapter and, ultimately, the book. In this chapter I discuss issues and practices related to setting up an assessment. The emphasis is on assessment of individual children of preschool age (between the ages of 3 and 5 years) for diagnostic exploration of referral concerns, usually initiated by parents, teachers or program personnel, or physicians. These concerns most frequently involve language development or other developmental delays, as well as specific conditions or syndromes that may have consequences for development of learning and social competence.

The early stages of the assessment process are arguably the most important; to a significant extent, what is revealed at the beginning influences what follows, and what follows should flow in an integrated way from the purposes of the assessment. Therefore, it is important for assessors to think about and plan for what needs to happen at the beginning so that what follows can develop logically from this foundation and so that a meaningful relationship among assessment, intervention, and follow-up can result.

However, we must first have an idea of what is meant by the term *assessment*, primarily to distinguish it from any specific activity such as testing (Bagnato, Neisworth, & Munson,



1997). Assessment is a broad, comprehensive process, not any specific activity or technique (Batsche & Knoff, 1995; Danielson, Lynch, Moyano, Johnson, & Bettenburg, 1989; Lidz, 1981; McConnell, 2000). Primarily, assessment is a mental activity of the assessor, and the assessment tasks are chosen to facilitate this process; it does not take place on a sheet of paper, but within the brain of the individual who integrates and interprets the information. I define *assessment* as the process of data gathering that informs decision making. If this is the case, then the first step of assessment is to be explicit regarding the nature of the decisions to be made, followed by determining the most likely sources of data that will inform these decisions. Such an approach to assessment requires flexibility, which is now increasingly advocated by lawmakers (Lidz, Eisenstat, Evangelista, Robinson, Stokes, Thies, & Trachtman, 2000). Flexibility in assessment involves tailoring the procedures to fit the referral questions and issues rather than reflexively administering the same battery of tests to all children. Contrary to some practices, flexible assessment does not mean doing less; it may even mean doing more. It certainly means doing assessment differently—different from the past and from still existing practices, and different for each child. If we expect teachers to individualize their classroom practices to meet the needs of their pupils, then assessors should be capable of this as well.

The three major purposes of assessment are entitlement-classification (also referred to as eligibility for special education services), planning of interventions, and evaluation of outcomes (Rosenfield & Nelson, 1995). Alternatively, the kinds of decisions to be made concern diagnosis, description of current states, and generation of prescriptive interventions (Simeonsson & Bailey, 1988), as well as evaluation.

This book focuses on procedures and methods for conducting an assessment with any preschool-age child, rather than on specific kinds of disorders. Disorders and disabilities are well reviewed in other texts, but other texts generally fail to provide in-depth coverage of the wide array of assessment approaches now available for application to young children, with the intent of facilitating the utilization of these procedures. There was a time when taking a course on preschool assessment meant learning the Bayley, the Wechsler scales, and the Stanford-Binet. In my many years of teaching a course on preschool assessment, such standardized instruments were delegated about 3 to 4 of the total 15 weeks available, with the other weeks providing hardly sufficient time to squeeze in the many other viable and frequently more useful sources of data for this population. Thus, our journey is not limited to a review of tests, and is certainly not restricted to standardized tests; these are discussed when appropriate to the context. Our journey is through the many choices of approaches to data gathering available to the thinking assessor. The assessor who uses these approaches will never be functioning on automatic. This assessor will not become bored or burnt out. This assessor will don the cap of Sherlock Holmes and become a detective, generating hypotheses, searching for the pieces to construct a situation and solve a problem, and, most of all, finding ways to improve the competence of the children referred for services and their families who provide contexts for their development.

The general model of assessment advocated in this text is best conceptualized as ecological or context-based (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Paget & Nagle, 1986; Tharinger & Lambert, 1989). Our referrals may be child driven, but our assessments must be ecologically valid and look at the child in the contexts of home, community, and program. Using this model, we will never assume that a problem exists solely within the referred child, although the child's predispositions and "hardware" may indeed be a significant issue. We will always consider history, meaning, and opportunity in any approach to problem solving. We will work with families and other re-