

Finding Fitting Solutions to Monitoring, Screening and Assessment

By Jessica Ball, MPH, PhD

Parents and other primary caregivers often want to know: *Is my child developing well? What can I do to help my child stay on track? Does my child need any special supports?* Early childhood educators usually want to know this too! People who spend a lot of time with a child are usually in the best position to observe a child's progress, to understand the child's interests, developing skills, and learning needs. With some understanding of child development and seeing what other children in a community can do at different ages, parents and educators are often the first to notice when something about a child's development seems off track. If it takes a team to raise a child, they are a child's Most Valuable Players!

Monitoring, screening and assessment are usually planned, structured approaches to gathering information about a child's strengths and areas where they may need more time or extra help. The goal is to deepen an understanding of the child so that the child can be supported to learn and grow to their full potential. Another goal is to establish a 'baseline' so that significant changes in the child over time are more likely to be noticed, measured and understood. These goals fit well in most early childhood programs.

Close observation and regular documentation of a child's behaviours in different situations is a good way to start systematically monitoring a child's development. Conversations with primary caregivers, encouraging them to share observations of their child across a range of situations, will round out a view of the child's progress and needs.

There are many structured observation systems, such as the High Scope Child Observation Record¹ or the Work Sampling System². Programs may choose to use an existing recording system or create their own. The main goal is to observe the child in activities that tap into different kinds of capacities across sensory, cognitive, language, social, emotional, spiritual, wellness, fine motor, and gross motor domains.

Learning Stories³ is an approach that uses observation, narrative, photos, drawings, and child-selected pieces to create a portfolio which conveys a child's learning and changes over time. This documentation encourages everyone - the child, parent and educators - to 'tell their story' about the child's experiences. For example, soon after a child starts a program, the educator observes the child and writes a story about the child's first days. This is sent to the primary caregivers, setting the tone for their relationship with family members as con-

versational, open, curious, and collaborative. Educators are encouraged to consider how the learning stories recognize and demonstrate the child: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, communicating ideas, and taking responsibility.

The pathway from everyday observations to more structured processes typically goes from monitoring system, screening tool, referral for diagnostic assessment, and referral for service or a determination that no special intervention is needed. In all of these, conversations with children, their primary caregivers, and others who have regular contact with the child are primary sources of information and insight.

What about standardized tools? Are mainstream tools fitting in culturally-grounded programs? There are good reasons to worry. Heavy-handed use of Euro-Western 'tools' by insensitive outsiders has often resulted in over-diagnosis of developmental delay, deficits, and disorders in Aboriginal children. Too often, this has resulted in exclusion from regular programs and classrooms, stigma, and inappropriate interventions. Yet, bad practice does not necessarily reflect on the utility or validity of the tool itself, but rather on the competence of the person using it, and how and why they are using it.

As Elders so often advise: "Do it in a good way." Solutions exist for using mainstream approaches and standardized tools in culturally-based programs. Studies have shown that most young First Nations and Métis parents are receptive to the use of mainstream tools. And many Aboriginal early childhood programs in BC use standardized tools, often in ways that are adapted to the preferences and goals of particular communities. Good process and adaptations to the tool are always possible. The key is to know what you are trying to achieve, and to engage in conversations with parents and other primary caregivers before deciding how to proceed. Consent, relational practice that yields cultural safety, and a clear purpose are always good starting points.

Monitoring, screening and assessment can include a wide variety formal and informal, quantitative and qualitative approaches. Information gathered may include, for example, observations of children's play; descriptions and observations of children's art, music, social skills, and puzzle play; developmental checklists; and children's performance on formal, standardized tests. Before choosing a type of information gathering technique, we must ask ourselves:

1. What do we want to know about this child?
2. Why do we want to know this?
3. What kinds of information do we need to gather?
4. How will we gather the necessary information?
5. What will we do with this information once we gather it?

Some key principles can help guide our responses to these questions.

Monitoring, screening and assessment should:

- be non-threatening, safe, and part of an ongoing collaborative relationship with the child and family;
- draw on multiple sources of information;
- address children's current level of strengths, as well as anticipated growth areas in the future;
- be a step in the process of continued feedback; and
- lead to a positive result for the child and family in terms of supports and services that promote optimal developmental outcomes. Sometimes funders or other outside agencies want data gathered about children. Be sure parents give consent and that something meaningful, constructive, and safe results from the information given to a third party.



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emotional development and self-help. Each questionnaire includes a page of tips for primary caregivers to provide age-appropriate activities and play materials for their child.

A description and review of 25 tools used in early childhood is available on the University of Alberta, Community-University Partnership website.⁵ The Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships Program at the University of Victoria provides reports on the ASQ and guidance for educators about screening and assessment at www.ecdip.org.

Being both curious and cautious about standardized systems and external demands for monitoring, screening and assessment is prudent. When done in a good way, with respect for parent and child rights, awareness of local contexts, and a collaborative approach, these processes can promote engagement with children and their family members, deepen our understanding of each child's unique gifts, and point to ways to best nurture them.

References:

- ¹ <https://highscope.org/assessment/child>
- ² <https://www.pearsonclinical.com/childhood/products/100000755/the-work-sampling-system-5th-edition.html>
- ³ <https://www.myece.org.nz/educational-curriculum-aspects/227-learning-stories>
- ⁴ Dionne, C., McKinnon, S, Squires, & Clifford, J. (2014). Development screening in a Canadian First Nation (Mohawk): psychometric properties and adaptations of ages and stages questionnaires (2nd ed). BMC Pediatrics, 14-23
- ⁵ <https://www.ualberta.ca/faculties/centresinstitutes/community-university-partnership/resources/early-childhood-measurement-tool-reviews/assessment-tools>

Please Note: BCACCS has developed a training course called "Connections" that can support you to learn more about both informal and formal assessment tools and methods. The course explores non-standard assessment methods which can assist educators to understand a child's learning journey in a holistic context and culturally safe manner. It also examines a variety of formal assessment tools and discusses their practical application. If you would like more information contact kirsten@acc-society.bc.ca.

In BC, the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) has wide acceptance in Aboriginal early childhood programs (<https://agesandstages.com/>). The ASQ is a parent-completed screening tool composed of 21 age-specific questionnaires, with 6 questions in each of 5 developmental domains: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal and social abilities. Recent studies have shown that it is a valid and useful tool for First Nations children.⁴ Item content can be adapted to make it relevant to the culture and lifestyle of local children without reducing the validity of the ASQ. This contextualization is always important. Adaptation and good practice is explained in an excellent guide produced by the Step by Step Child and Family Center in Kahnawake Mohawk Territory: "Finding Our Own Way. ASQ Cultural Adaptations Guidelines for Aboriginal Communities" (available at www.agesandstages.com).

The Nipissing District Developmental Screen (NDDS) (www.ndds.ca) is another widely used screening tool in Aboriginal early childhood programs. It is completed by a parent or child care professional. It consists of 14 age-specific questionnaires up to age 6. It explores: vision, hearing, speech, language, communication, gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, social/

Conference Save the Date

The BCACCS conference will be hosted in Richmond at the Sheraton Vancouver Airport Hotel on November 1-3, 2018 which is a Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

Registration will open in August! Check for updates http://www.acc-society.bc.ca/files_2/annual-conference.php.