

# Conducting informal developmental assessments

by Craig Gibson, Sandra Jones, and Tamika Patrick

*“The teacher’s first duty is to watch over the environment, and this takes precedence over all the rest. Its influence is indirect, but unless it is well done there will be no effective and permanent results of any kind, physical, intellectual or spiritual.”*

Maria Montessori



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The early childhood professional takes on numerous roles: She inspires; she nurtures; she fosters creativity in the young and impressionable minds of tomorrow. And while each one of these roles holds equal importance to the other, none is more important than the role of the observer:

- You observe children’s cognitive abilities during floor play and group activities.
- Their social/emotional skills are assessed by observing their interactions with peers and adults throughout their daily routines.
- Fine motor skills are observed when they are engaged in tabletop activities (i.e., coloring, cutting, etc.) and at other times during the day when they are required to use the small muscles in their hands.
- Gross motor skills are observed out on the playground, when children run, jump, kick, throw, etc.
- And their adaptive (i.e., self-help) skills are assessed throughout the day when they are expected to perform various tasks (i.e., toileting, dressing, hygiene, feeding, etc.).

But let’s face it, when you have 15, 20, or more children in your class, it is extremely difficult to focus your attention on each of

the five developmental domains per child: Cognition, communication, social-emotional, physical, and adaptive. The ‘key,’ however, is to know exactly what to look for in each one of your students, so that you can make an informed decision when determining whether or not there may be a ‘delay’ in a given area of development.

As professionals in our chosen fields of study, it is our responsibility to possess a wealth of knowledge in the area of child development. To lack basic knowledge of what children should and should not be able to do in their preschool years could prove detrimental to their academic and social growth, as they progress from one stage of development to the next. When assessing the ‘whole child,’ you are looking at a total of five developmental domains:

**Cognition Development** (thinking and learning skills):

- Problem-solving skills (e.g., puzzles, nesting cups, etc.)
- Playing with toys in a purposeful and functional manner
- Understanding of basic concepts (e.g., size concepts, quantitative concepts, numerical concepts, etc.)
- Interest in books and ability to answer questions about a story

- Counting skills (e.g., rote/1:1 correspondence)

### Communication development

Communication consists of three sub-domains:

- *Expressive Language*: Ability to vocalize needs, wants, thoughts, and ideas.
- *Receptive Language*: What a child understands/comprehends (ability to follow directions).
- *Articulation*: Ability to clearly produce speech sounds.

### Social/Emotional Development

(interpersonal relationships):

- Ability to engage in age-appropriate interactions with peers and adults.
- Participation in parallel or cooperative play schemes.
- Ability to follow basic directives or commands consisting of one or more steps (direction-following also falls under communication).

**Physical Development** (fine motor and gross motor skills):

#### Fine motor:

- Using small muscles in the hands and fingers (e.g., building blocks, cutting, coloring, manipulating buttons, snaps, zippers, etc.).

#### Gross motor:

- Using the large muscles in the upper and lower body (e.g., running, jumping, kicking, throwing, catching, hopping, skipping, and galloping).
- Ability to catch and throw a ball accurately.
- The child's ability to maneuver around his environment safely.

### Adaptive Behavior Development

(self-care skills):

- Hand washing

- Toilet-training (e.g., verbalizing toiletting needs)
- Using utensils during meals
- Dressing and undressing
- Care for personal items (e.g., if the child can hang his jacket on a hook when coming in from outside)
- Cleaning up after himself

### Assessment

Having a basic understanding of the five developmental domains, and what each one entails, is only half the battle. The next step is to develop the ability to pull it all together by looking at the 'whole child' in the context of your daily classroom routines. To do this effectively, you must shift your thinking in terms of how you look at child development. You can do this by looking at all five areas of development simultaneously:

**Story Time** (communication/cognition): This time of the day offers an excellent opportunity to assess a child's development in the areas of cognition and communication. Remember that the two domains overlap and should not be viewed as separate entities.

When reading a story, check to see if children are able to comprehend the story details by answering basic 'wh' questions (i.e., 'who,' 'what,' 'where,' and 'when'). Remember that receptive language falls under both cognition and communication. If a child is unable to answer basic questions, he may be having difficulty processing verbal information, or perhaps he needs more time to process the information.

**Outdoor Play** (gross motor/communication/social-emotional): You can assess all three developmental areas by simply observing your students. Assess these skills by looking at their peer interactions as they engage in gross motor play:

- Is the child's play reciprocal? (social-emotional and communication)
- Does the child participate in turn-

taking activities while kicking a ball back-and-forth? (social/emotional)

- Is the child able to run, jump, kick, throw, skip, gallop, etc., all while maintaining his balance? (gross motor)
- Is the child able to catch the ball by trapping it between her arms and chest? (gross motor)
- Is the child able to run, jump, and climb playground equipment while maintaining his balance in the process? (gross motor)

**Tabletop Activities** (fine motor, communication, social-emotional, cognition, adaptive behavior):

- When working with scissors, look to see if your students can cut along a straight line while using safety awareness in the process.
- Look to see if they have established a hand preference (left- vs. right-handed).
- Assess their pre-writing strokes:
  - Look to see if they can copy vertical, horizontal, and intersecting lines, in addition to geometric shapes.
  - Check to see if they are using an appropriate grasp while coloring and drawing (e.g., adult grasp, pincer grasp, etc.).
- Assess their peer interactions:
  - Check to see if they are able to take turns with the arts and crafts supplies (social-emotional).
  - Look at their ability to follow single- and multi-step directions as they work to complete assigned tasks (communication and cognition).
  - Assess their adaptive behavior and fine motor development by checking for overall independence as they complete various activities.
  - Assess their ability to manipulate play-dough, as well as their ability to pull the lid off the container and putting it back on again when they're finished playing (adaptive

behavior/fine motor).

- Look at their ability to clean up their own mess/spills (adaptive behavior).

#### **Puzzles** (cognition, fine motor):

- Assess children's ability to place puzzle pieces (both large and small) in their appropriate locations (cognition: problem-solving, fine motor). If unable to complete this task, determine the root cause of deficiency.

Is the child unable to complete the puzzle due to the overall complexity of the task? If so, have them complete a puzzle consisting of fewer pieces. Remember that completing puzzles is a visual-motor task that requires them to scan a number of pieces simultaneously. When giving children puzzles to complete, determine beforehand if the puzzle is one that is 'appropriate' for their age level.

If the child is able to match the pieces, but is simply having trouble making the pieces fit, this may be a fine motor concern (i.e., using the small muscles in their hands and fingers). If this is the case, have the student manipulate puzzles that have knobs, and increase the complexity of the puzzles as they become more independent.

#### **Lunch/Snack** (social-emotional/communication/fine motor/adaptive behavior):

- Assess children's peer interactions for age-appropriate social behaviors (social/emotional).
- Check to see if they are engaging in reciprocal (e.g., back-and-forth) conversations (social/emotional).
- Check to see if they are able to clearly express their wants and needs without frustration (com-

munication/articulation and social/emotional).

- Assess their ability to independently puncture the straw through the juice box, in addition to opening snack wrappers, sandwich bags, etc. (fine motor, adaptive behavior).
- Check to see if they are they able to eat using utensils (adaptive behavior and fine motor).
- Assess their ability to independently wash and dry their hands by turning the faucet on and off, pumping the soap into the hands, and getting a towel (adaptive behavior and fine motor).

#### **Centers/Free Play** (cognition/communication/social-emotional/fine motor/adaptive behavior):

- See if children are engaging in appropriate social interactions by turn-taking and sharing selected toys of interest (communication and social/emotional).
- Assess their expressive language skills by observing their peer interactions, and their receptive language and self-help skills when giving them directives (e.g., placing toys back on the shelf, cleaning up blocks, etc.).
- When in the dramatic play area (i.e., kitchen, dress-up play, etc.) assess their pretend and make-believe play for appropriateness (cognition/social-emotional).
- During center play, assess their ability to transition from one activity to the next (cognition, receptive language).
- When observing children during centers or free play, take this opportunity to assess their overall play skills:
  - Check to see if they are playing with toys appropriately and for age-appropriate periods of time before moving on to another activity of their choosing.
- When playing with blocks, check to see if they are using their problem-solving skills when constructing

towers, houses, buildings, etc. (cognition). Check for an understanding of positional directions (e.g., 'on top of,' 'under,' 'over,' 'next to,' etc.). Block play is also a good time to assess fine motor skills as the child stacks one block on top of another (using the small muscles in his hands). You can also assess their social-emotional skills during this time if they are constructing designs with their peers.

#### **Arrival and Departure** (cognition/fine motor/adaptive behavior):

- When arriving in the morning, assess children's ability to hang their jackets and coats on hooks or hangers (adaptive behavior, self-help).
- Assess their ability to follow multi-step directions (cognition/receptive language (example: "Get your coats and line up at the door"). Inability to follow basic demands may be the result of a processing problem.
- When departing in the afternoon, check to see if they are able to follow multi-step directions: Get your coats and line up by the door. Yes, some children may simply choose not to follow such directions, but others may need directions broken down for them into smaller chunks.

As you can see, each time of the day provides you with ample opportunities to assess your students' development in each of the five areas of developmental domain. Once you familiarize yourself with each area of development, you can then conduct thorough and effective informal assessments within your daily activities and routines.

### **Resources for Professionals**

#### **Books**

- *A Parent's Guide to Developmental Delays: Recognizing and Coping with Missed Milestones in Speech, Movement, Learning, and Other Areas* by

Laurie Fivozinsky LeComer

- *Every Child Can Learn: Using Learning Tools and Play To Help Children with Developmental Delays* by Katrin Stroh, Thelma Robinson, & Alan Proctor
- *The Developing Child in the 21st Century* by Sara Smidt
- *Assessing Children's Personal and Social Development (Kindle Edition): Measuring the Unmeasurable?* by Helena Burke

#### Web sites

- National Institute of Health  
[www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
[www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)
- The National Association for Child Development  
[www.nacd.org](http://www.nacd.org)
- Child Development Institute  
[www.childdevelopmentinfo.com](http://www.childdevelopmentinfo.com)