

**EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULUM,  
CHILD ASSESSMENT, AND PROGRAM EVALUATION—  
BUILDING AN ACCOUNTABLE AND EFFECTIVE SYSTEM  
FOR CHILDREN  
BIRTH THROUGH AGE EIGHT**

**A Joint Position Statement of  
The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)  
and  
The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists  
in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE)**

### **Introduction**

At a time when an accumulating body of evidence shows that excellent early education yields long-lasting benefits (National Research Council 2001; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000; Campbell et al. 2002; Reynolds et al. 2001; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2000), federal, state, and local decision-makers are considering critical questions about young children's education. What should children learn in the years from birth through age eight? How might we know whether they are learning and developing well? And what evidence should be used to decide whether the programs that care for and educate young children are doing an effective job? These questions are essential to making decisions about **early childhood curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation**. Responses to these questions, grounded in research and professional consensus, form the basis of this joint position statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education.

### **Overview**

This document begins by summarizing the position of NAEYC and NAECS/SDE about what is needed in an effective system of early childhood curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation. Next, the document outlines the position statement's background and intended effects and describes the major trends and issues that have influenced the document's recommendations. With this context, the document then outlines the principles and values that guide an effective system of curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation, linked to and guided by equally effective standards or expectations for early learning and development (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2002). Then key recommendations, rationales, and indicators of effectiveness are presented for each of these components, together with frequently asked questions. Each component is also accompanied by a developmental chart that gives examples of how the recommendations would be implemented with infants and toddlers; preschoolers;

and kindergarten-primary grade children. The position statement concludes by describing the kind of support and resources that policy-makers, programs, and early childhood professionals need in order to develop effective systems of curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation.

## The Position

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) take the position that policymakers, the early childhood profession, and the wider community of stakeholders, have a shared responsibility to:

- Construct comprehensive **systems** of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation that are guided by effective early learning standards and by a set of core values and principles: *ethical behavior on behalf of children; support for children as individuals and members of families, cultures, and communities; civic and democratic values; intentionality; coordinated systems; respect for evidence; and accountability.*
- Implement **curriculum** that is intentional, challenging, engaging, developmentally and culturally appropriate, comprehensive, and that is likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children.
- Use ethical, appropriate **assessment** of young children's strengths, progress, and needs as a central part of all programs. Implement assessment methods that are developmentally and culturally appropriate, family-centered, embedded in ongoing activities, supported by professional development, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes: (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning, and (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention.
- Regularly **evaluate** early childhood programs in light of program goals, using varied, appropriate, and technically sound evidence to determine whether programs meet the expected standards of quality, and whether the programs achieve their outcomes.
- Provide the kind of **support** that will enable early childhood programs to implement integrated, productive approaches to curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation connected with well-defined standards or guidelines for early learning and development.

## **Background and Desired Results of the Revised Position Statement**

In 1990, NAEYC and NAECS/SDE published a joint position statement, *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8* (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 1990). This document revises the earlier position statement in light of significant trends, issues, and new research emerging since 1990 and extends its recommendations to include the full birth-age 8 scope of early childhood education.

NAEYC's 1997 position statement *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple 1997) defined the “how” of early education—the wide range of effective teaching strategies and supportive relationships needed to promote early development and learning. Extending and complementing that publication, this position statement—*Early Childhood Curriculum, Child Assessment, and Program Evaluation*—describes important features of the “what” (curriculum content) and the “how well” (child assessment and program evaluation) of early childhood education. This position statement also extends and links with the position statement *Early Learning Standards: Creating the Conditions for Success* (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2002), which has been endorsed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and supported by the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

### **Intended Effects of This Position Statement**

In developing and disseminating position statements, NAEYC and its partner organizations have specific aims in mind. We intend to:

- Take informed positions on significant, controversial issues affecting young children's education and development—in this case, issues related to curriculum development and implementation, the purposes and uses of assessment data, and benefits and risks in accountability systems for early childhood programs.
- Promote broad-based dialogue on these issues, within and beyond the early childhood field.
- Create a shared language and evidence-based frame of reference so that practitioners, decision-makers, and families may talk together about early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation.
- Influence public policies—in this case, those related to early childhood curriculum development, adoption, and implementation; child assessment practices; and program evaluation practices—both individually and as these

fit together into a coherent educational system linked to child outcomes or standards.

- Stimulate investments needed to create accessible, affordable, high-quality learning environments and professional development to support the implementation of excellent early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation.
- Build more satisfying experiences and better educational and developmental outcomes for all young children.

## Major Trends and Issues

Since the publication of the position statement *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8* (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 1990), significant trends and issues have influenced early childhood education and the children, families, and communities that are served by early childhood programs. Many changes have had positive effects on the field and on children served in early childhood programs. However, in other cases they have raised serious concerns about the impact on children's development, learning, and access to services.

To provide a context for the key recommendations in the revised position statement, the following section will outline some of those major changes and trends.

### **1. The characteristics and needs of children, families, programs, and early childhood staff have changed significantly.**

A snapshot of the children and families served by our country's early childhood programs would look very different today than if it had been taken in 1990. Many more children would appear in the picture, as ever-higher proportions of children attend child care, Head Start, preschool, family child care, and other programs (NIEER 2003; Lombardi 2003). In more and more families, both parents are working, further increasing the demand for child care, especially for infants and toddlers (Lombardi 2003; Paulsell et al. 2002).

The diversity of the United States' population continues to expand, most dramatically in early childhood programs that now include large numbers of young English language learners, children living in poverty, and children with disabilities (U.S. Census Bureau 2003; Annie E. Casey Foundation 2003; DHHS 2002; Hodgkinson 2003; Rosenzweig, Brennan, & Ogilvie 2002; Brennan et al. 2001). These trends have significant implications for decisions about curriculum, assessment practices, and evaluations of the effectiveness of early childhood programs.

Over the past decade, programs serving young children and families have also changed. Early Head Start did not exist in 1990, and few states offered prekindergarten programs either on a universal or targeted basis. In contrast, in 2003 Early Head Start served approximately 62,000 low-income children from birth through age 3 and their families (ACF 2003), and 43 states invested in prekindergarten programs based in or linked with public schools (Mitchell 2001). Full-day kindergarten has become common in many school districts; in 2002, 25 states and the District of Columbia paid for kindergarten for the full school day, at least in districts that chose to offer these services (Quality Counts 2002). Head Start programs increasingly collaborate with other early education programs, including state-funded prekindergarten programs, community-based child care providers, and local elementary schools (Lombardi 2003; Head Start Program Performance Standards 1996). Any recommendations made in 2003 with respect to early childhood curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation must take this expanded scope into account.

National reports and government mandates have raised expectations for the formal education and training of early childhood teachers, especially in Head Start and in state-funded prekindergarten programs (ASPE 2003; National Research Council 2001). Teachers today are expected to implement more effective and challenging curriculum in language, literacy, mathematics, and other areas, and to use increasingly complex assessments of children's progress (National Research Council 2001). These expectations, and the expanding number of early childhood programs, have exacerbated the field's staffing crisis. The early childhood field lacks adequate numbers of qualified staff to implement appropriate, effective curriculum and assessment for young children. Turnover continues to exceed 30% annually (Lombardi 2003), and compensation for early childhood educators continues to be inadequate and inequitable (Laverty et al. 2001). All early childhood settings—including public school-based programs—are experiencing critical shortages and turnover of qualified teachers, especially in areas that serve children who are at highest risk for negative outcomes (Keller 2003; Quality Counts 2003).

## **2. Evidence has accumulated about the value of high-quality, well-planned curriculum and child assessment.**

In recent years, national reports and position statements from national organizations have sounded a consistent theme: Children, including the youngest children, are capable of learning more, and more complex, content than had been previously thought (Committee for Economic Development 2002; National Research Council 2001; National Research Council 2000; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000). We now have a better understanding of the developmental foundations of discipline-specific or subject matter knowledge, with new research helping to define developmental trajectories or continua that can be incorporated into

curriculum (e.g., NAEYC & IRA 1998; NAEYC & NCTM 2002; National Research Council 1998). These reports conclude that intentional, evidence-based curriculum, implemented by qualified teachers who promote learning in appropriate ways, can contribute significantly to positive outcomes for all children.

**3. State and federal policies have created a new focus on early childhood standards, curriculum, child assessment, and evaluation of early childhood programs.**

Today, every state has K-12 standards, specifying what children are expected to know and be able to do in various content and/or developmental areas (Align to Achieve 2003). In addition, Head Start now has a Child Outcomes Framework (Head Start Bureau 2001), and Scott-Little, Kagan, and Frelow's survey (2003) found that 39 states had or were developing standards for children below kindergarten age. As in the K-12 standards movement, states are beginning to link curriculum frameworks to early childhood standards (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow 2003). Especially in the arena of literacy, both federal and state expectations have emphasized that "scientifically based research" should guide curriculum adoption and evaluations of curriculum effectiveness.

The trend toward systematic use of child assessments and program evaluations has also led to higher stakes being attached to these assessments—a downward extension of K-12 accountability trends. State investments in preK programs have come with clear accountability expectations: In an increasingly high-stakes climate, programs that are unable to demonstrate effectiveness in improving readiness and creating positive child outcomes perceive themselves at risk of losing support.

**4. Renewed concerns have arisen about the misuses and harmful consequences of some approaches to early childhood curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation.**

As the attention of program developers, educational decision-makers, and policymakers has increasingly focused on curriculum, assessment, and accountability, so too have the risks of misusing these components of early education.

In response to expectations that programs should "have" a curriculum, programs have sometimes adopted curricula that are of poor quality, poorly aligned with children's developmental and cultural characteristics, or narrowly focused on trivial, intellectually shallow content (Espinosa 2002; National Research Council 2001). In other cases, a well-designed curriculum may be implemented through teaching practices that are poorly matched with young children's characteristics and needs (Bredenkamp & Copple 1997).

Again in responses to increased attention to assessment and accountability, assessment practices in many early childhood programs have sometimes become mismatched to children's ages, cultures, or developmental capacities. As with curriculum, assessment instruments have often been narrow or trivial, focusing on a limited range of skills and causing teachers to narrow their curriculum and teaching practices, especially when the stakes are high.

In addition, basic tenets of appropriate assessment, as expressed by national professional organizations (e.g., NASP 2002; AERA 2000; AERA, APA, & NCME 1999), have frequently been violated. Examples are the failure of certain assessments or screening tools to meet adequate technical standards (Glascoe & Shapiro 2002), or the use of assessments designed for one purpose (such as to inform classroom instruction) for entirely different and incompatible purposes (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Clifford 2003; NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2002). A serious concern has been the use of results of screening to evaluate program effectiveness or to exclude children from services.

## **Summary**

In the years since the publication of NAEYC's and NAECS/SDE's original position statement on early childhood curriculum and assessment, much more has become known about the power of high-quality curriculum content, effective assessment practices, and ongoing program evaluations as tools to support better outcomes for young children. Yet the infrastructure of the early childhood education system, within and outside the public schools, has not allowed this knowledge to be fully used. A result has been that curriculum is often not as effective or well implemented as it needs to be, and good assessment practices may fail to be incorporated into the culture and ongoing routines of early childhood programs. Yet when assessment is given increased attention, the methods may be inappropriate or their uses may be unethical. Program evaluation, so important in determining whether children's and families' needs are being met, is often ignored or, when implemented, is not based on sufficiently comprehensive or technically adequate measures, and the results of the evaluations may not be consistently used to support program improvement. In many cases, families are not fully involved as partners in decisions about curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation (Horton & Bowman 2002). An overarching concern is that these elements of high-quality early education—curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation—have often been addressed in disconnected and piecemeal fashion.

Yet the promise of a truly integrated, effective system of early childhood curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation is great. The early childhood field has greater research knowledge in each of these areas than ever before,

and policy makers are convinced that early education holds the key to later success, especially for our most vulnerable children. Although serious disagreements remain about how best to use this key, unprecedented opportunities await early childhood educators.

In taking advantage of these opportunities, clear principles and values are essential guides. Before turning to specific recommendations, the next section of this document proposes six such principles.

## **Guiding Principles and Values**

- **Commitment to ethical behavior on behalf of children**

High-quality early childhood curriculum and assessment can contribute to positive outcomes for children, if principles of fairness and equity are used as a guide. NAEYC and NAECS/SDE emphasize that decisions about curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation must never deny children access to the curriculum or to other services to which they are entitled; rather, program staff, families, and children themselves should become better equipped to create beneficial results.

- **Support for children as individuals and members of families, cultures and communities**

An effective system of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation supports children's diversity, which includes not only children's ages, individual learning styles, and temperaments but also the culture, racial identity, language, and values of their families and communities.

- **Civic and democratic values**

The values of a democratic society guide the position statement's recommendations. Curriculum supports children's acquisition of values such as respect for others; equality, fairness, and justice; the ability to think critically; and community involvement. These outcomes are weighed heavily in evaluating program effectiveness. In addition, decisions that affect young children, families, and programs involve stakeholders in democratic and respectful ways.

- **Intentionality**

Clear, well-articulated and significant goals, including early learning standards, direct the design and implementation of curriculum, assessment tools and practices, and evaluation processes. These goals are public and are understood by those who have a stake in the system.

- **Coordinated systems**

In effective early education systems the desired outcomes and content of the curriculum, the ways in which children's progress is assessed, and the evaluation of program effectiveness are integrated and connected in a



positive, ongoing cycle. For example, information from classroom assessments is used to influence teaching of individuals and of groups of children; curriculum goals and content influence the choice of assessment tools; and programs are evaluated for effectiveness in relation to goals, curriculum emphases, and effects on children, families, and others.

- **Respect for Evidence**

Any effective system of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation rests on a strong foundation of evidence. As recently articulated by NAEYC's Commission on Early Childhood Program Standards, "Evidence" includes empirical research, professional values and carefully documented professional consensus (Definition for evidence based 2003), and other sources of confidence as decisions are made on behalf of children—with differing weight being given to differing sources of evidence (Decision making rules 2003).

- **Accountability**

NAEYC and NAECS/SDE believe that professionals are indeed accountable to the children, families, and communities they serve. Although many aspects of children's lives are outside the influence of early childhood programs, staff and administrators, as well as policymakers, have a responsibility to show themselves and others that they are working effectively toward important developmental and educational goals, and that they use information from assessments and evaluations to improve this work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section presents key recommendations for each of three critical elements of an effective system: *curriculum*, *child assessment*, and *program evaluation*. The position statement also includes a recommendation about the *supports* programs need if they are to implement such a system. Each recommendation is followed by a brief rationale that justifies the recommendation on the basis of evidence and professional values. Next are listed a set of “indicators of effectiveness”—what one would be likely to see, if the recommendation is being implemented. Because the position statement addresses the full birth-age 8 range, charts are included to give examples of ways in which each recommendation would be implemented for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarten-primary age children. Finally, the document lists a set of “frequently asked questions” about each element, and offers responses to these questions.

### **Curriculum: Key Recommendation and Indicators of Effectiveness**

***Effective systems implement curriculum that is intentional, challenging, engaging, developmentally and culturally appropriate, comprehensive, and that is likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children.***

**Rationale.** Curriculum is more than a collection of enjoyable activities. “Curriculum that is goal-oriented and incorporates concepts and skills based on current research fosters children’s learning and development” (Commission on NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria 2003). Definitions of curriculum, and issues about the sources and purposes of curriculum, have been debated for many years (Eisner 2002; Goffin & Wilson 2001; Marshall, Schubert, & Sears 2000; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1999; Hyson 1996), but in general curriculum is seen as the means by which a society helps learners acquire the knowledge, skills, and values that that society deems most worth having.

Children can learn more than educators used to believe (National Research Council 2001; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000), especially when supported by skilled adults (Bodrova & Leong 1996). Good early childhood curriculum, implemented with intentionality and strong professional development, provides those kinds of challenges and, therefore, leads to positive outcomes (Frede 1998). Researchers have also synthesized a great deal of information about the processes that influence early development and learning (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000), including the effects of young children’s culture, ethnicity, language, and family/community contexts (e.g., Bowman 2002; Rogoff et al. 1993). This

research suggests that “school readiness” encompasses and is supported by emotional and social competence, physical health, and other learning foundations (Raver 2002; Peth-Pierce 2001)—underscoring the importance of comprehensive rather than narrow curricula in early childhood programs. Evidence also supports the role of children’s “engagement” and positive “approaches to learning” (NCES 2002; Raspa, McWilliam, & Ridley 2001) in mediating their ability to benefit from the curriculum. Play is an especially powerful way to stimulate young children’s engagement, motivation, and lasting learning (Bodrova & Leong 2003).

Widespread agreement exists that curriculum—including early childhood curriculum—should be based on evidence and evaluated for its effectiveness. However, claims that specific curricula are “research based” are often not supported—or the curricula have been shown to be effective with children who are older or younger, or who differ in culture or language from the children for whom the curriculum is now being adopted. Further, programs may adopt a curriculum for one specific area, such as reading or mathematics, with little regard for how that curriculum aligns with, or is conceptually consistent with, other aspects of the program. This piecemeal approach can result in a disconnected conglomeration of activities and teaching methods, lacking focus or coherence (National Research Council 2001). However, a body of longitudinal evidence does describe both the long-term effects of specific curriculum models or approaches (Marcon 1999; Schweinhart & Weikart 1997) and the effects of curriculum that is coherent and well implemented (National Research Council 2001; Frede 1998). The results of a federally funded program of research on early childhood curriculum (IES 2003) may help early childhood educators make better-informed decisions when adopting or developing curriculum.

### Indicators of Effectiveness

- ***Clear, shared, research-based goals.*** Curriculum goals are clearly specified, shared, and understood by all. Curriculum content is based on sound research and is organized around principles of child development and learning. The curriculum and related activities and teaching strategies are designed to help achieve the goals in a unified, coherent way.
- ***Significant content taught with focus and integration.*** Children explore, think about, and learn about developmentally and educationally significant “big ideas,” skills, and approaches to learning. The curriculum promotes complex thinking and concept development through focus, intentional teaching, and frequent integration across subject matter categories.
- ***Activity and engagement.*** Children are cognitively, physically, and socially active as they engage in the curriculum’s learning

- opportunities. The curriculum goals bring intentionality to the program’s schedule and the balance of child- and adult-initiated experiences. Children are interested and absorbed; their feelings of security, emotional competence, and linkages to family and community are supported.**
- ***Developmental fit.*** The content and implementation of the curriculum is a good fit with children’s individual, age-related, and cultural characteristics, as well as with their interests, as seen in observations and assessment of children.
  - ***Comprehensiveness and professional validation.*** The curriculum, in its entirety, includes attention to all areas of development and learning. When subject-specific curricula are adopted, they meet the standards of relevant professional organizations (e.g., the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM]; National Science Teachers Association [NSTA]; and the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance [AAHPERD]) and are reviewed and implemented so that they fit together coherently.
  - ***Evidence of benefits.*** Research and other evidence indicates that the curriculum, if well implemented, will be likely to have beneficial effects.

### Early Childhood Curriculum: Frequently Asked Questions

**1. *What are curriculum goals?***

The goals of a curriculum state the important, desired outcomes for children. When adopting a curriculum that already has specified goals, it is important to analyze whether those goals are consistent with other goals of the early childhood program or with the early learning standards followed by the program. The goals of the curriculum should support and be consistent with broader expectations for young children’s development and learning.

**2. *What is the connection between the curriculum and activities for children?***

A good curriculum is more than a collection of activities. The curriculum suggests a coherent set of activities and teaching practices linked to standards or expectations—although not in simple one-to-one fashion: Good activities will support multiple goals. Together and over time, these activities and practices will be likely to help all children develop and learn the curriculum content. Standards and curriculum can give greater focus to activities, helping staff decide how these activities may fit together to benefit children’s growth.

**3. *What are the most important things to consider in making a decision about adopting or developing a curriculum?***

Among other considerations, it is important to consider the fit of the curriculum—as it is or as it might be adapted—(a) with broader goals, standards, and program values (assuming that those have been thoughtfully developed), (b) with what research suggests are the significant predictors of positive development and learning, (c) with the characteristics of the children for whom the curriculum is intended, and (d) with the values and wishes of the families and community served by the program.

**Early Childhood Curriculum: Frequently Asked Questions (cont.)****4. *What should be the connection between the curriculum for younger children and what they will encounter as they get older?***

Early childhood curriculum is not simply a scaled-back version of curriculum for older children. As emphasized in *Early Learning Standards* (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 2002), earlier versions of a skill may look very different than later versions: Knowing two U.S. states is a less important precursor of knowing all 50 states than gaining fundamental spatial and geographic concepts. Resources, including those listed at the end of this position statement, can help program staff become more aware of what the curriculum in later years consists of, and then to think and collaborate about important ways for these pieces to connect and build together, but also to remain developmentally distinct.

**5. *Is there such a thing as “curriculum” for babies and toddlers?***

Indeed there is, but as the developmental chart in this section of the position statement suggests, it looks very different than curriculum for preschoolers or first-grade children. Infant/toddler programs that are of high quality have clear goals and base their curriculum on knowledge of very early development, which is focused on relationships and embedded in daily routines and experiences. High-quality infant/toddler curriculum intentionally develops language, promotes security and social competence, and encourages understanding of essential concepts about the world, laying the foundation for mathematics, social studies, literacy, and creative expression without separate and formal lessons (Lally 2000; Semlak 2000; Lally et al. 1995).

**6. *When should the early childhood curriculum begin to emphasize academics?***

There is no clear dividing line between “academics” and other parts of a high-quality curriculum (Hyson 2003a). Even very young children are beginning, through play, relationships, and informal opportunities, to develop the basis of later knowledge of mathematics, social studies, science, and other areas of learning. As children approach school age, however, it is appropriate for the curriculum to pay focused attention to specific content areas, while still emphasizing active involvement and connections across domains.

**7. *Should programs use commercially available curricula, or is it better for teachers to develop their own curriculum?***

The quality of the curriculum should be the important question. If a commercially available curriculum—either in one content area or a comprehensive curriculum—has significant, well-specified goals, is consistent with the program’s broader goals and values, appears well-suited to the children and families served by the program, and is able to be implemented effectively by staff, then it may be worth considering. In all cases, programs will need to consider how any curriculum may be adapted to best meet children’s needs.

**8. *Is it all right to use one curriculum for mathematics, another for language and literacy, and another for social skills, and still another for music?***

If curricula are adopted or developed for distinct content or subject matter areas, it becomes especially important to examine them for coherence and consistency. Laying out the goals and underlying philosophy of each, do they appear consistent? What will it feel like for a child in the program? How differently will staff need to behave as they implement each component?

### Early Childhood Curriculum: Frequently Asked Questions (cont.)

**9. *What's needed to implement a curriculum effectively?***

Research suggests that extended professional development, often with coaching or mentoring, is a key to effective curriculum implementation (National Research Council 2001). Well-qualified teachers who understand and are supportive of the curriculum goals and methods are more likely to do a good job of implementing curriculum effectively. So-called scripted or “teacher-proof” curricula tend to be narrow, conceptually weak, or intellectually shallow. Another key to success is assessment. Ongoing assessment of children’s progress in relation to the curriculum goals gives staff a sense of how their approach may need to be altered for the group as a whole or for individual children.

## Assessment of Young Children: Key Recommendation and Indicators of Effectiveness

***Ethical, appropriate assessment of children’s strengths, progress, and needs is a central part of all effective early childhood programs. Assessment methods are developmentally and culturally appropriate, family-centered, embedded in ongoing activities, supported by professional development, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes: (1) making sound decisions about teaching and learning, and (2) identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention.***

### **Rationale:**

Often people think of assessment as referring only to formal standardized testing, but it has many components and many purposes. Assessment methods include observation, documentation of children’s work, checklists and rating scales, portfolios, and other methods, as well as standardized tests. Consensus has developed around the four primary and distinctive purposes of early childhood assessment, best articulated in the work of the National Education Goals Panel (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz 1998). Issues concerning two of these purposes are the focus of this section of the position statement: (1) assessment to support learning and instruction and (2) assessment to identify children who may need additional services (Kagan, Scott-Little, & Clifford 2003) (Two other purposes—assessment for program evaluation and monitoring trends; and assessment for high-stakes accountability—will be discussed in the next recommendation, on Program Evaluation and Accountability.)

Since assessment can be used for such varied purposes, and since assessment tools need to be selected for specific purposes, it is important to be clear about why assessments will be conducted as assessment systems are planned. High-quality programs are “informed by ongoing systematic, formal, and informal assessment approaches to provide information on children’s learning and development. These assessments occur within the context of reciprocal

communications with families and with sensitivity to the cultural contexts in which children develop” (Commission on NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria 2003). Assessment of children’s strengths, developmental status, progress, and needs provides essential information to early childhood professionals as they attempt to promote children’s development and learning, forming part of an ongoing cycle (Jones 2003). Classroom-embedded, ongoing, and comprehensive assessment is generally viewed as the foundation of good curriculum development and good teaching practices (Jones 2003; McAfee & Leong 2002; Stiggins 2002, 2001; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett 2000). When assessment is directed toward a limited set of skills, programs tend to ignore the very competencies that research shows provide a strong foundation for later success within and beyond academic skills (Raver 2002; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine 2000).

Research demonstrates that early identification and intervention for children with or at risk for disabilities can significantly affect outcomes (Shonkoff & Meisels 2000). Thus, early childhood programs play an important part in helping to identify concerns. Brief screening measures have been shown to be helpful in selecting children who may need further evaluation (Meisels & Fenichel 1996), but only if the screening tools meet high technical standards and if they are linked to access to further professional assessment.

In general, early childhood assessment specialists urge caution in the use and interpretation of formal, standardized tests of children’s learning, especially in the absence of complementary evidence and especially when the stakes are potentially high (Jones 2003; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Clifford 2003). Although all assessment activities should be guided by ethical principles (NAEYC 1998) and professional standards of quality (AERA, APA, & NCME 1999), the issues are more pressing when formal, standardized and norm-referenced tests are being considered as part of an assessment system. In those cases, the standards set forth in the joint statement of the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Center for Measurement in Education provide essential technical guidance (AERA, APA, & NCME 1999). The “Program Evaluation and Accountability” section of this position statement discusses these issues in more detail.

Both early childhood professionals and families need to be knowledgeable about and involved in assessment (Lynch & Hanson 2004; Hyson 2003b), although this is often not the case (Horton & Bowman 2002). Assessment literacy has been identified as a major gap in the preservice and in-service preparation of teachers and in communication with families (Barnett 2003; Stiggins 2002, 1999; Popham 2000, 1999); early childhood education is not an exception.

## Indicators of Effectiveness

- ***Adherence to ethical principles.*** Ethical principles underlie all assessment practices. Young children are not denied opportunities or services and decisions are not made about children on the basis of a single assessment.
- ***Compliance with professional criteria for quality.*** Accepted professional standards of quality are the basis for selection, use, and interpretation of assessment instruments, including screening tools. NAEYC and NAECS/SDE support and adhere to the measurement standards set forth by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Center for Measurement in Education (AERA, APA, & NCME 1999). When standardized tests are used, they meet these guidelines.
- ***Important, comprehensive, well-aligned targets for assessment.*** The targets for assessment represent a comprehensive, significant set of developmental and learning goals, rather than focusing only on a narrow set of skills. Assessments are aligned with standards or goals and with curriculum emphases.
- ***Evidence of benefits for children.*** Assessments lead to improved knowledge about children. This is translated into improved curriculum implementation and teaching practices that lead to better learning and developmental outcomes, and to better access to resources and supports for children with specific needs.
- ***Multiple methods over time.*** The evidence used to assess young children's characteristics and progress, in order to inform instruction or to identify children in need of further evaluation, is derived from authentic classroom contexts using broad, varied, and complementary methods that reflect children's culture, language, and experiences.
- ***Assessments embedded and repeated in classroom activities.*** For these purposes to be met, the assessment system emphasizes repeated, systematic observation, documentation, and other forms of criterion- or performance-oriented assessment embedded in classroom activities.
- ***Positive uses of evidence.*** Evidence of children's learning is used to create a better understanding of the learning of a specific child or group of children; to enhance overall knowledge of child



- development; and to improve educational programs for young children, while supporting continuity across the grades.**
- ***Screening always linked to follow-up.*** When concerns are identified on the basis of a screening or other assessment, appropriate follow-up, referral, or other intervention is used. Diagnosis or labeling is never the result of a brief screening or one-time assessment.
  - ***Limited and appropriate use of formal standardized tests.*** The use of formal standardized testing and norm-referenced assessments of young children is limited to situations in which such measures are appropriate and potentially beneficial, such as identifying potential disabilities. (See also the statement on the use of standardized testing as part of program evaluation and accountability, p. 21).
  - ***Knowledgeable staff and families.*** Staff and family members have the knowledge and skills to participate in ongoing assessment of children’s strengths, developmental status, progress, and needs. Preservice and inservice training builds teachers’ and administrators’ “assessment literacy,” creating a community that values assessment as a tool to improve outcomes for children.

#### **Child Assessment—Frequently Asked Questions**

1. ***What is the connection between curriculum and assessment?***  
Curriculum and assessment are closely tied together. Classroom-based assessment tells teachers what children are like and allows them to modify curriculum and teaching practices to best meet the children’s needs. Curriculum also influences what is assessed and how—for example, a curriculum that emphasizes the development of self-regulation should be accompanied by assessments of the children’s ability to regulate their attention, manage strong emotions, and work productively without a great deal of external control.
2. ***What should teachers be assessing in their classrooms, when, and why?***  
The answer to this question depends, again, on the program’s goals and on the curriculum being used in the program. But all teachers need certain information in order to understand children’s individual and developmental characteristics and to begin to pick up on any special needs or concerns. The most important thing is to work with other staff and administrators to develop a systematic plan for assessment over time, using authentic measures and focusing on outcomes that have been identified as important. The primary goal in every case is to make the program (curriculum, teaching practices, etc.) as effective as possible so that every child benefits.

**Child Assessment—Frequently Asked Questions (cont.)****3. *What is screening and how should it be used?***

Screening is a quickly administered assessment used for the purpose of identifying those children who may benefit from more in-depth assessment. Although screening tools are brief and appear simple, they are held to strict technical standards for test construction, and they should be culturally and linguistically relevant. Only staff with sufficient training should conduct screening; families should be involved before, during, and after screening as important sources of information about the child; and there should always be links to further specialized assessment and intervention when needed. Screening is a first step and should *not* be used to identify children as having special needs or as “unready.” Additionally, screening results should not be used as indicators of program effectiveness.

**4. *How is assessment different for children of different ages, cultures, and abilities?***

The younger the child, the more difficult it is to use assessment methods that rely on verbal ability, on focused attention and cooperation, or on paper-and-pencil methods. The selection of assessments should include careful attention to the ages for which the assessment was developed. Even with older children (kindergarten-primary age), the results of single assessments are often unreliable for individuals, since children may not understand the importance of “doing their best” or may be greatly influenced by fatigue, temporary poor health, or other distractions. In some cultures competition and individual accomplishment are discouraged, again making it difficult to validly assess young children’s skills. Finally, children with disabilities benefit from in-depth and ongoing assessment to ensure that their individual needs are being met; when children with disabilities participate in assessments used for typically developing classmates, the assessments need adaptation in order for all children to demonstrate their competence (McLean, Bailey, & Wolery 2004; Sandall, McLean, & Smith 2000; Meisels & Atkins-Burnett 2000).

**5. *How should specific assessment tools or measures be selected? Is it better to develop one’s own assessments or to purchase them?***

Thorough discussion of early learning standards, the goals of the program, and the curriculum being used in the program will guide selection of specific assessment measures. In a number of cases, curriculum models are already linked to related assessments. It is important to think systemically so that assessments address all important areas of development and learning. This may seem overwhelming, but the same assessment will often give helpful information about multiple aspects of children’s development. Another important consideration is whether a particular assessment tool or system will create undue burdens on staff, or whether it will actually contribute to their teaching effectiveness. Issues of technical adequacy are also important to examine, especially for assessments that will be used for accountability purposes. Special attention should be given to whether an assessment was developed for and tested with children from similar backgrounds and cultures as those for whom the assessment will be used. As far as developing one’s own assessments or using already-developed tools, the decision can in part be based on what one wishes to assess and whether good quality, culturally relevant tools are available.

**Child Assessment—Frequently Asked Questions (cont.)****6. *What kind of training do teachers and other staff need in order to do good assessment?***

Professional development is the key to effective child assessment. Positive attitudes about assessment and “assessment literacy” are developed through collaboration and teamwork, in which all members of an early childhood program come to agree on desired goals, methods, and processes for assessing children’s progress. In addition, preservice programs in 2- and 4-year higher education institutions should provide students with research-based information and opportunities to learn and practice observation, documentation, and other forms of classroom-level assessment (Hyson 2003b). Understanding of the place and limitations of standardized tests in early childhood education, including their use with children with disabilities, is also part of assessment literacy, even for those not trained to administer such tests.

**7. *How should families be involved in assessment?***

Ethically, families have a right to know about and participate in decisions about the assessment of their children. Families of young children with disabilities have a legal right to be involved in assessment decisions (IDEA 1997). Early childhood program staff share the results of assessments—whether informal observations or more formal test results—with families in ways that are clear, respectful, culturally responsive, and constructive.

**Program Evaluation and Accountability:  
Key Recommendation and Indicators of Effectiveness**

***Effective systems regularly evaluate early childhood programs in light of program goals, using varied, appropriate, and technically sound evidence to determine whether programs meet the expected standards of quality and whether they achieve intended outcomes.***

**Rationale.**

With increased public investments in early childhood education have come expectations that programs should be accountable for producing positive results (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Clifford 2003). The results of carefully designed program evaluations have the potential to influence better early education for young children. Program evaluations vary in scope from relatively informal, ongoing evaluation that a child care center might conduct to improve its services, to large scale assessments of the impact of statewide prekindergarten initiatives (Schweinhart 2003; Gilliam & Zigler 2000). The higher the stakes for programs and public investments, the more critical and rigorous are the standards for design, instrumentation, and analysis (Henry 2003; Scott-Little, Kagan, & Clifford 2003).

Of particular importance is the issue of alignment—in this case, alignment of assessment instruments with the identified goals of the program or intervention that is being evaluated. Mismatches between program goals and assessments may lead to erroneous conclusions about the effectiveness of particular interventions, or to undesirable narrowing of emphases within the program, focusing only on those that will be the focus of assessment (Muenchow 2003; Yoshikawa & Zigler 2000).

Assessment specialists emphasize that the goals of program evaluation are different than the goals of classroom-level assessment that is intended to improve teaching and learning (e.g., Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz 1998; Jones 2003). These specialists further emphasize that many assessments originally designed for one purpose cannot be validly used for other purposes. When such efforts are undertaken, special attention is needed to issues of sampling and aggregation (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Clifford 2003; Horm-Wingerd, Winter, & Plofchan 2000).

As more states use child-level data as part of a system to evaluate the effectiveness of prekindergarten and other programs, clear guidelines are needed as to the technical properties of measures to be used, as well as the place of child-level data within a larger system that includes other data sources (Love 2003). Several issues have been discussed extensively: (1) the risk of misusing child data (especially in the absence of gain scores) to penalize programs that serve large numbers of children who live in poverty (Muenchow, 2003); (2) the potential misuse of formal standardized tests with very young children as a substitute for, and as the sole indicator of, program effectiveness (Yoshikawa & Zigler 2000); and (3) the risk of conducting poor quality evaluations because of lack of investment in training, technical assistance, and data analysis capabilities. Any effective system of program evaluation and accountability must take these issues into consideration.

### Indicators of Effectiveness

- ***Evaluation for continuous improvement.*** Programs undertake regular evaluation, including self-evaluation, in order to document or track the extent to which programs are achieving their desired results, with the goal of engaging in continuous improvement.
- ***Goals as guides for evaluation.*** Evaluation designs and measures are guided by goals identified by the program and by the developers of a program or curriculum.
- ***Comprehensive goals.*** Program goals that are used to guide the evaluation represent a comprehensive range of goals, including goals related to families, staff, and community as well as child-oriented goals across developmental and learning areas.

- ***Standardized assessments—sampling in large-scale assessments.*** When formal standardized tests are used as part of program evaluation and accountability, matrix sampling is used to diminish the burden of testing on children and to reduce the likelihood that data will be inappropriately used to make decisions or judgments about individual children.
- ***Standardized assessments—appropriate uses and safeguards.*** When formal tests are used as part of program evaluation, they must be developmentally and culturally appropriate for the particular children in the program, valid in terms of the curriculum, and technically sound (including reliability and validity).
- ***Children’s gains.*** When child assessments are used as part of program evaluation, the primary focus is on children’s gains or progress as documented in observations and samples of classroom work over the duration of the program, rather than focusing only on children’s scores upon exit from the program.
- ***Administration and data analysis.*** Program evaluations, at whatever level or scope, are conducted by well-trained individuals who are able to evaluate programs in fair and unbiased ways. Data are analyzed systematically and can be quantified or aggregated to provide evidence of the extent to which the program is meeting its goals.
- ***Stakeholder involvement, communication, and focus on improvement.*** Stakeholders, including families, are involved in planning and discussing the results of program evaluations. Evaluations are used as a basis for improving services to young children and families. Over time, evidence is gathered that program evaluations do influence specific improvements.

#### Program Evaluation and Accountability—Frequently Asked Questions

**1. *What is the purpose of evaluating early childhood programs?***

The primary purpose of program evaluation is to improve the quality of education and other services provided to young children and their families.

**2. *What is “accountability”?***

The term “accountability” refers to the responsibility that programs have to deliver what they have been designed to do, and in most cases what they have been funded to do.

Accountability usually is emphasized when programs such as prekindergarten programs or public school programs, or Head Start, have received local, state or federal funds. In those cases the public has a legitimate interest in receiving information about the results obtained.

**Program Evaluation and Accountability—Frequently Asked Questions (cont.)****3. *What standards of quality should be used in evaluating programs that serve young children?***

Attention should be given to the goals that the program itself has identified as important. National organizations (such as NAEYC through its accreditation standards and criteria), state departments of education, and others have also developed more general standards of quality. In addition, comprehensive instruments such as the ECERS (Early Childhood Rating Scale) (Harms & Clifford 1998) and the High/Scope Quality Assessment (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation 1998), as well as program standards such as the Head Start Program Performance Standards (1996), are widely used to obtain data on program quality. The advantage of using such measures, or participating in a national accreditation system, is that the program is evaluated against a broad set of criteria that have been developed with expert input.

**4. *Is it necessary for all programs serving young children to be evaluated?***

Programs differ in size, scope, and sponsorship. For some, regular evaluation is a requirement and condition of continued support. However, all programs serving young children and their families should undergo some kind of regular evaluation, in order to engage in continuous self-study, reflection, and improvement. In large-scale state assessments (for example, of prekindergarten programs), some data may be collected from all programs while a smaller sample may participate in an intensive scientific evaluation with appropriate comparison groups (Schweinhart 2003).

**5. *What components should a program evaluation include?***

Again, beginning with the program's goals and (where relevant) its mandated scope and mission is important. But in every case, the evaluation should include consideration of all components of the program as designed and as delivered. In other words, evaluation should include attention to the processes by which services and educational programs are delivered as well as to the outcomes or results.

**6. *Who should conduct program evaluations?***

This depends on the scope and purpose of the evaluation. In some cases, program staff themselves are able to gather the information needed for review and improvement. However, greater objectivity is obtained when evaluations are conducted by others, often including in-depth interviews or discussions with staff and families. In high-stakes situations, it is not desirable for those who have a direct investment in the outcome of the evaluation to be involved in collecting and analyzing data, because of at least the appearance of conflict of interest.

**7. *What kinds of support are needed in order to conduct a good evaluation?***

Adequate resources are essential, so that program evaluation does not drain resources from the actual delivery of services. Consultation about the design of the evaluation is helpful, as is assistance in gathering data. Print and web-based resources are available to those just getting started in thinking about program evaluation (McNamara 2003; Stake 2003; ACYF 1997). Support systems or facilitation projects are commonly found to help programs that are preparing for accreditation or other reviews.

**Program Evaluation and Accountability—Frequently Asked Questions (cont.)****8. *How should data gathered in a program evaluation be analyzed?***

Once again, the purpose of the evaluation and the scope of the program and the evaluation itself will influence the answer to this question. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are appropriate and useful, depending on the questions being asked. Returning to the central questions of the evaluation will guide how the data will be analyzed, since the results will help answer those questions.

**9. *How should information from a program evaluation be used?***

As described earlier, program evaluation data are intended to improve program quality. In an open process, results are shared with stakeholders, who may include families, staff, community members, funders, and others. Objective discussion of strengths and needs in light of the program's goals and mission will help guide decisions about changes that would create even higher quality and more effective service delivery.

**Support for Programs:  
Key Recommendation and Indicators of Effectiveness**

***Effective systems have the kind of support that will enable early childhood programs to implement integrated, productive approaches to curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation connected with well-defined standards or guidelines for early learning and development.***

**Rationale.**

Implementing the preceding recommendations for curriculum, child assessment, and program evaluation requires a strong infrastructure. As compared with many other countries (OECD 2001), the U.S. continues to have a fragmented system of early childhood education, under multiple auspices and with greatly varying levels of support (Lombardi, 2003).

A critical issue is the quality of the early childhood workforce. As expectations for professional preparation and for implementing high-quality curriculum and assessment systems rise (National Research Council 2001; National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education 2000), the field is faced with continuing low wages and high turnover (Lombardi 2003; Quality Counts 2002; National Research Council 2001; Whitebook, Sakai, Gerber, & Howes 2001). Research continues to underscore the role of formal education and specialized training in producing positive outcomes for children (National Research Council 2001).

Although not replacing formal education, ongoing professional development is another key to helping staff become skilled in implementing evidence-based, effective curriculum and assessment systems. Again, research has identified many of the characteristics of effective staff development (Education World 2003;

NAESP 2001; NSDC 2001; National Research Council 2000), but much of it still consists of one-time workshops with little follow-up, coaching, or mentoring (National Research Council 2000). In addition, little time is available for program staff—teachers, administrators, and others—to meet around critical issues of curriculum and assessment, or to prepare for program evaluations in a thoughtful way (National Research Council 2000). And once program evaluations are completed and results are available, public policies may fail to support needed improvements and expansion of services—especially if the costs of the assessments themselves are absorbing resources needed in cash-strapped states and cities (Muenchow 2003).

### **Indicators of Effectiveness**

- ***Staff recruitment and retention.*** Early childhood programs have resources to recruit and retain well-qualified and well-compensated staff.
- ***Professional development and collaboration.*** Staff have access to professional development, and to the professional time and opportunities for collaboration, that will enable them to develop, select, and implement high-quality curriculum and assessment that meet young children’s learning and developmental needs.
- ***Support to conduct effective program evaluations and to use the results.*** Programs and state or local agencies have resources and other supports to prepare for and complete regular program evaluations, and to use the results of the evaluations to make needed improvements.



### Support for Programs—Frequently Asked Questions

- 1. *What kind of professional development is needed for early childhood program staff?***  
First, staff need to possess the appropriate qualifications to develop and implement excellent curriculum and assessment practices. But even well-qualified staff need ongoing, job-embedded professional development to help them better understand the curriculum and design more effective approaches to working with children. A key issue is to create genuine “learning communities” of staff, within and across programs, who can support and learn from one another as they implement integrated systems of curriculum and assessment.
- 2. *What are the challenges in providing that professional development?***  
Early childhood programs vary greatly in sponsorship and funding. Time and resources for professional development and collaborative work are often limited both in public schools and in child care settings. Whatever the setting, too often professional development is limited to isolated workshops without real engagement of staff in authentic, continuous learning and practice. Adult learners who vary in prior experience and education are often treated as equivalent in the design and delivery of professional development. These and other obstacles need to be addressed in order to support efforts to create effective systems of curriculum and assessment.
- 3. *What do early childhood program administrators need?***  
Whether child care directors, Head Start administrators, or school principals, administrators are key to effective systems of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation. Some administrators have limited exposure to the special characteristics of young children, and therefore to special considerations in implementing early childhood curriculum and assessment. Others are well grounded in early childhood education but have had little opportunity to link with other administrators in programs serving children as they transition from Head Start or child care into public schools. Administrators are often the primary decision-makers when it comes to adopting curriculum and assessment systems, arranging for staff development, and planning program evaluations. Support and technical assistance are critical to administrators as they deal with multiple challenges.
- 4. *What other resources and supports will help ensure effective systems of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation?***  
Public will and investments in a well-financed system of early childhood education, and in other components of services for young children and their families, are needed to make the recommendations feasible.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL CHARTS**

The section that follows includes developmental charts that provide examples of ways in which each recommendation of this position statement would be implemented in programs for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarten-primary age children. The following charts are included:

- Early Childhood Curriculum in Programs for Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students
- Early Childhood Assessment in Programs for Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students
- Early Childhood Program Evaluation and Accountability in Programs for Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students
- Support for Programs Serving Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students

## Early Childhood Curriculum in Programs for Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students

Effective systems implement curriculum that is intentional, challenging, engaging, developmentally and culturally appropriate, comprehensive, and that is likely to promote positive outcomes for all young children.

Infants/Toddlers	→	Preschoolers	→	Kindergarten/Primary
<p><b>Curriculum that is intentional:</b> At all ages, curriculum goals link with important developmental tasks and are comprehensive in scope. A major shift is toward greater focus on academic disciplines, without ignoring their developmental foundations.</p>				
<p><b>Curriculum that is intentional</b> includes goals that focus on children’s development as they learn about themselves and others, as well as ways to communicate, think, and use their muscles. Goals for infants address security, responsive interactions with caregivers, and exploration. Goals for toddlers address independence, need for control, discovery, and beginning social interactions.</p>	→	<p><b>Curriculum that is intentional</b> includes goals that focus on children’s exploration, inquiry across disciplines, and expanding vocabularies. Goals address children’s cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and physical development. Goals across domains reflect grounding in children’s socio-emotional development.</p>	→	<p><b>Curriculum that is intentional</b> includes goals that focus on children’s emergent knowledge and skills in all content areas, including language and literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, health, physical education, art, and music.</p>
<p><b>Intellectually challenging and engaging curricula:</b> At all ages the curriculum leads children from where they are to new accomplishments while maintaining their interest and active involvement. Content that is engaging for children of different ages changes with development and with new experiences, requiring careful observation and adaptation.</p>				
<p><b>Intellectually challenging and engaging curricula</b> for infants underlie experiences in which they can use their whole bodies and their senses as they engage in play alone, with a primary caregiver, and at times with or near other infants. The same criterion applies for toddlers, while also focusing on their emerging abilities to play with other children.</p>	→	<p><b>Intellectually challenging and engaging curricula</b> facilitate children’s construction of knowledge through their interactions with materials, each other, and adults. The curriculum promotes experiences in which children’s thinking moves from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract.</p>	→	<p><b>Intellectually challenging and engaging curricula</b> promote children’s developing attitudes as “learners”—using their curiosity, creativity, and initiative. The curriculum promotes experiences in which children use oral and written language, mathematical and scientific thinking, and investigatory skills to build a knowledge base across disciplines and expand their skills repertoire.</p>
<p><b>Developmentally and culturally appropriate curricula:</b> At all ages, curriculum fits well with children’s ages, individual characteristics, families and communities, and cultural contexts. Curriculum for younger children will make these connections primarily through relationships, daily routines, and “rituals”; older children benefit from more explicit incorporation of culturally relevant materials and from topic-centered as well as integrated learning opportunities.</p>				
<p><b>Developmentally and culturally appropriate curricula</b> address the wide variations in infants’ and toddlers’ interests, temperaments, and patterns of growth and development. Consistency between home and infant/toddler program values, experiences, and rituals is key to planning and implementation.</p>	→	<p><b>Developmentally and culturally appropriate curricula</b> reflect a wide range of developmental levels for knowledge and skills. Integration across subject matter areas is high, while some “focusing” is appropriate (e.g., experiences devoted to learning the alphabetic principle). Culturally based experiences—including values, “props,” and other representations—are key to planning and implementation.</p>	→	<p><b>Developmentally and culturally appropriate curricula</b> reflect more consistent ranges of developmental levels. The curriculum focuses on a continuum of learning in topic areas and integration across disciplines; also facilitates adaptation of instruction for individual children who are having difficulty and for those needing increasing challenges. Children learn ways to develop constructive relationships with other people and respect for individual and cultural differences.</p>

Infants/Toddlers	→	Preschoolers	→	Kindergarten/Primary
<p><b>Comprehensive curricula:</b> At all ages curricula attend to a broad range of developmental and learning outcomes. At different ages the curriculum may pay particularly focused attention to specific areas but without ever ignoring some domains in favor of a narrow set of other outcomes.</p>				
<p><b>Comprehensive curricula</b> incorporate children’s relationships with their caregivers and routines (e.g., sleeping, diapering/toileting) as opportunities for learning, as well as through experiences in which children play with objects, their caregivers, and (increasingly) each other. The curriculum provides a context in which teachers use their knowledge about each child to plan opportunities for learning across domains—cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical.</p>	→	<p><b>Comprehensive curricula</b> facilitate children’s learning through individual and small and large group experiences that promote cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development. The curriculum provides a context in which children learn through “typical” types of play (e.g., with blocks). Within this context, various academic disciplines are addressed—including mathematics, literacy, science, social studies, and the arts.</p>	→	<p><b>Comprehensive curricula</b> lead to instruction that is organized and focused on helping children acquire deeper understanding of information and skills in subject areas (e.g., language and literacy, mathematics). The curriculum facilitates recognition of the connections between and across disciplines and domains. Curriculum-based experiences encompass a variety of active strategies in which individuals or small groups explore, inquire, discover, demonstrate, and solve problems.</p>
<p><b>Curricula that promote positive outcomes:</b> At all ages the curriculum is selected, adapted, and revised to promote positive outcomes for children. Outcomes include both immediate enjoyment and nurturance and longer-term benefits. Curriculum for younger children pays special attention to those key developmental outcomes shown to be essential to later success—not simply earlier versions of academic skills.</p>				
<p><b>Curricula that promote positive outcomes</b> promote experiences that lead to documented evidence that infants and toddlers are learning about themselves and others, communicating their needs to responsive adults, gaining understandings of basic concepts, and developing motor and coordination skills appropriate for their ages. Outcomes also include evidence that each child is developing a sense of trust, security, and, increasingly, independence.</p>	→	<p><b>Curricula that promote positive outcomes</b> promote experiences that lead to documented evidence that preschoolers are acquiring and applying knowledge and skills in cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical domains. Children demonstrate their increasing abilities to represent their experiences in a variety of ways (e.g., through drawing/painting, dictating/writing, and dramatic play).</p>	→	<p><b>Curricula that promote positive outcomes</b> promote experiences that lead to documented evidence that children are acquiring important skills in literacy, mathematics, and other content areas—appropriate for their ages as well as their interests and the communities in which they live. Children demonstrate their increasing understanding of key concepts, skills, and tools of inquiry of the content areas; their application of these understandings to various situations; and their understanding of the connections across disciplines.</p>

## Early Childhood Assessment in Programs for Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students

Ethical, appropriate assessment of children’s strengths, progress, and needs is a central part of all effective early childhood programs. Assessment methods are developmentally and culturally appropriate, family-centered, embedded in ongoing activities, supported by professional development, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes: making sound decisions about teaching and learning, and identifying significant concerns that may require focused intervention.

Infants/Toddlers	→	Preschoolers	→	Kindergarten/Primary
<p><b>Assessment that is developmentally and culturally appropriate:</b> At all ages, the focus of the assessment is consistent with the program’s goals for children. The assessment system incorporates methods that reflect children’s culture, language, and experiences. Assessment of older children relies more on direct measures and formal methods.</p>				
<p><b>Developmentally/culturally appropriate assessment</b> focuses on children’s status and progress in their abilities to learn about themselves and others, communicate, think, and use their muscles. Assessment measures are grounded in and incorporate families’ home values, experiences, and rituals.</p>	→	<p><b>Developmentally/culturally appropriate assessment</b> focuses on children’s exploration, inquiry across disciplines, and expanding vocabularies. Assessment measures address children’s cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and physical development. Measures also are grounded in and incorporate culturally based experiences, including family values and cultural representations.</p>	→	<p><b>Developmentally/culturally appropriate assessment</b> focuses on the continuum of learning in topic areas as well as integration across disciplines—language and literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, health, physical education, art, and music. Teachers involve children in evaluating their own work. Assessment measures are grounded in and incorporate cultureally based experiences, including family values and cultural representations.</p>
<p><b>Assessment that is family centered:</b> At all ages, families know about and participate in decisions about the assessment of their children. Teachers both obtain information from parents and share information about children that they have collected and analyzed in ways that are clear, respectful, and constructive. A major shift is the sharing of information from a primarily child health and development focus to more discipline-specific reports.</p>				
<p><b>Assessment that is family centered</b> comprises a system in which teachers and parents share information periodically about children’s engagement in routines (e.g., being fed or eating) and experiences (e.g., playing peek-a-boo or looking for hidden objects). For infants, parents also receive daily information about children’s eating, sleeping, and eliminating.</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment that is family centered</b> comprises a system in which teachers and parents share information periodically about children’s progress in all domains. Teachers and parents work together to make decisions regarding children’s learning goals and approaches to learning.</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment that is family centered</b> comprises a system in which teachers and parents share information periodically about children’s progress in all domains. Assessment measures might include letter or numerical grades; when such grades are used, reports to parents also include narrative comments regarding children’s learning across disciplines.</p>
<p><b>Assessment that is embedded in ongoing activities:</b> At all ages, assessment incorporates teachers’ observation recordings and other documentation, obtained during regular classroom activities, collected systematically at regular intervals. For younger children, assessment is primarily incorporated with their play and interactions; for older children, assessment methods may be more clearly defined, separate from other activities, and include some paper-and-pencil methods.</p>				
<p><b>Assessment that is embedded in ongoing activities</b> includes teachers’ observation recordings of children’s performance during routines and activities, as well as other documentation (e.g., photographs or videotapes of children playing; samples of drawings).</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment that is embedded in ongoing activities</b> includes teachers’ observation recordings of children’s performance during classroom experiences, as well as other documentation (e.g., photographs of children’s block constructions; samples of easel paintings).</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment that is embedded in ongoing activities</b> includes teachers’ observation recordings of children’s performance during instructional activities, as well as other documentation (e.g., children’s written records of their knowledge and skill acquisition, samples of work completed).</p>

Infants/Toddlers	→	Preschoolers	→	Kindergarten/Primary
<p><b>Assessment that is supported by professional development:</b> For teachers of all children from birth through age 8, professional development includes education that incorporates research-based information regarding assessment systems and measures and includes opportunities for teachers to refine their assessment and analysis skills. Professional development experiences change from assessment that is primarily play focused to paper-and-pencil and other methods separate from classroom activities as the ages of the children taught by the staff increases.</p>				
<p><b>Professional development regarding assessment</b> addresses observation recordings and other play- and interaction-focused measures.</p>	→	<p><b>Professional development regarding assessment</b> addresses observation recordings and other forms of play-based documentation (e.g., children’s writing samples, graphs representing children’s experiences with quantities).</p>	→	<p><b>Professional development regarding assessment</b> addresses observation recordings, collections of children’s work, and more formal assessment methods (e.g., teachers asking children questions regarding their knowledge of topics, children’s performance with problem-solving tasks).</p>
<p><b>Assessment that is used to make sound decisions about teaching and learning:</b> At all ages, assessment information is used to support learning, consistent with the goals of the curriculum. For younger children, information about each child’s growth and development is used to make decisions regarding possible changes to the environment, interactions, and experiences. As children grow, assessment information primarily is used for making decisions about what each child can do, what he or she should be ready to learn next, and instructional methods that will help the children meet their goals.</p>				
<p><b>Assessment for making decisions about teaching and learning</b> addresses children’s abilities to learn about themselves and others, communicate, think, and use their muscles. Teachers adjust their routines and experiences for each child based on his or her skill acquisition, temperament, interests, and other factors.</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment for making decisions about teaching and learning</b> addresses children’s cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and physical development. Teachers develop short-and long-range plans for each child and for the group based on children’s knowledge and skill acquisition, interests, and other factors.</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment for making decisions about teaching and learning</b> addresses the continuum of learning in topic areas as well as integration across disciplines. Teachers use assessment information to determine which teaching approaches are working, as well as adaptations needed for individual children who are having difficulty and for those needing increasing challenges.</p>
<p><b>Assessment that is used to identify significant concerns that may require focused intervention:</b> At all ages, health and developmental screening is used to identify those children who may benefit from more in-depth assessment. Very young children may be screened regularly for potential health problems and developmental delays. For older children, screening and follow-up assessment may lead to identification of disabilities or other specific concerns that were not apparent when children were younger.</p>				
<p><b>Assessment for identifying potential disabilities</b> focuses on health needs and acquisition of normal developmental milestones. Screening may be conducted as part of a child’s well-baby or well-child care and/or through participation in Early Head Start or other group programs.</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment for identifying potential disabilities</b> focuses on health needs and possible developmental delays. Screening typically is conducted as children enter Head Start and other preschool programs. Often, staff from these programs receive specific training for conducting the assessments.</p>	→	<p><b>Assessment for identifying potential disabilities</b> typically is conducted for all children entering kindergarten, including vision and hearing screening. Formal school-district or State-mandated screening and referral protocols are followed for all children.</p>

## Early Childhood Program Evaluation and Accountability in Programs for Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students

Effective systems regularly evaluate early childhood programs in light of program goals, using varied, appropriate, and technically sound evidence to determine whether programs meet the expected standards of quality and whether they achieve the intended outcomes.

Infants/Toddlers	→	Preschoolers	→	Kindergarten/Primary
<p><b>Effective program evaluation and accountability:</b> Programs serving children of all ages engage in ongoing evaluation in light of their identified goals and are accountable for producing beneficial results. Although many similarities are found across all high-quality early childhood programs, the specific standards of quality used to evaluate programs, issues about the kinds of evidence that is most appropriate, and specific risks inherent in accountability systems will vary depending on the ages of the children served.</p>				
<p><b>Effective program evaluation and accountability</b> uses standards of quality that are specific to infants and toddlers, as well as those that are relevant to all programs. In evaluating program effectiveness, great importance is placed on family-related goals and outcomes because of their critical developmental significance for infants and toddlers. Caution is used when considering children's gain scores as part of an accountability system because of the wide variability and unevenness of early development.</p>	→	<p><b>Effective program evaluation and accountability</b> attends to a comprehensive range of developmental and learning outcomes, both in identifying program goals and in evaluating effectiveness. As preschool programs increasingly become part of state accountability systems, outcomes should not be limited to academic disciplines but should include developmental domains. Given the difficulty of using formal standardized assessments with preschool children, alternate methods and sampling procedures should be emphasized.</p>	→	<p><b>Effective program evaluation and accountability</b> in programs serving kindergarten and primary-age children is typically conducted within a system of federal, state, and district expectations. Although more capable of participating in some kinds of formal assessments, children 6-8 may still fail to show their level of competence under testing conditions, leading to erroneous conclusions about programs as well as individual children. Accountability systems for children of this age run the risk of reinforcing a narrow range of program goals; special attention is needed to maintain a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate system.</p>

## Support for Programs Serving Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers, Kindergarteners, and Primary Grade Students

Effective systems have the kind of support that will enable early childhood programs to implement integrated, productive approaches to curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation connected with well-defined standards or guidelines for early learning and development.

Infants/Toddlers	→	Preschoolers	→	Kindergarten/Primary
<p><b>Effective support systems:</b> All early childhood programs are in need of greater resources and supportive public policies to allow this position statement’s recommendations to have their desired effects. At the program level, staff working with children of different ages have distinctive though interrelated needs for professional development around specific content and pedagogical issues. Because of the great diversity of sponsorship, governance, and regulations relevant to programs serving children in each age group, different approaches are needed to create essential systems of support. An overarching need is for a stronger infrastructure to create an integrated, well-financed system of early care and education.</p>				
<p><b>Effective support systems</b> are challenged by the critical shortage of qualified infant/toddler program staff, and by the lack of connection between infant/toddler programs and the larger early education system. Resources and policies need to address these challenges, while also creating job-embedded professional development focused on key issues such as developing and maintaining nurturing relationships, establishing trust, security, and independence, and conducting play-based assessments that inform daily routines and developmental experiences.</p>	→	<p><b>Effective support systems</b> are challenged by the wide disparities in staff education and training requirements across different sectors of preschool education, which further exacerbates teacher shortages in many under-resourced community programs. Public policies are needed to move toward a more integrated and consistent system and toward appropriate and consistent early learning standards. Support is also needed for the kind of in-depth staff development that builds teachers’ ability to foster language, literacy, and mathematical competence while promoting and assessing all domains, using the information to plan for each child and the group.</p>	→	<p><b>Effective support systems</b> are challenged by policies and requirements in kindergarten-primary education that may be inconsistent with appropriate and effective curriculum and assessment practices. In addition to policy advocacy, support is needed to help staff work together to implement effective instructional programs that focus on the continuum of learning in topic areas as well as integration across disciplines. The support system also helps staff to assess children’s status and progress through classroom-embedded strategies, used to help all children succeed.</p>



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## **ADDITIONAL MATERIALS**

**A subsequent draft, following posting of the draft position statement on NAEYC's Website ([www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)) and review by stakeholders, will have the following additional materials:**

- **APPENDIX**

An appendix will describe the background and processes used to revise the 1990 Joint Position Statement of NAEYC and NAECS/SDE.

- **GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS**

Several graphics will help readers visualize the connections among standards, curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation, as well as the cycle of assessment and planning that supports teachers' instructional decisions.