



Resource Article

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Children's Play"

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Play is an important part of children's life and learning. It is also a valuable context for understanding a child's development. Through play and playful interactions, children show their functional skills and naturally demonstrate how they are making meaning of the world around them. Team discoveries from play-based assessments can also be useful for identifying goals to promote the child's development, determining next steps in development, and identifying intervention strategies that can scaffold the child's learning and sophistication of play and playful interactions. Recognizing that children's play provides an organic means for understanding more about a child's development, Kelly-Vance and Ryalls (2008) present a review of play-based assessment tools and propose recommended practices.

One of the earliest play-based tools is the Play Assessment Scale (PAS) (Fewell, 1986). This tool includes 45 items, organized into eight play age ranges, and involves observation of spontaneous and facilitated play that can be used to estimate a child's play age.

Perhaps the most comprehensive tool is the Transdisciplinary Play-Based

Assessment (TPBA/TPBA2, Linder, 1993, 2008). It uses an arena approach whereby the assessment team observes the child engaging in different types of play including unstructured play alone, where a facilitator can participate but not initiate any play, play with a facilitator who actively attempts to engage the child in activities that have not yet been observed, peer play where the child is observed playing with another child, and play with their parent. The assessors code all the child's play and playful interactions in terms of four categories: sensorimotor, social/emotional, communication and language, and cognition.

Play in Early Childhood Evaluation System (PIECES) (Cherney, et al., 2003) grew from the work of Linder's TBPA. Administration of this tool involves observation of the child playing freely on his/her own. A facilitator and parent may be present, but they are instructed to refrain from asking questions or directing the child's play in any way. While some play behaviors may not be observed, since there is no facilitated play, what is observed are the child's typical play behaviors. Behaviors observed are

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organized in terms of play sophistication.

Play-based assessment provides opportunities to see a child do things he/she typically does as well as opportunities to understand more about what interests the child. By integrating this information with other data, the team can develop a complete picture of the child's holistic development. Play-based assessments can be easier for families to understand. This is because their child's natural play is more familiar than observing their child perform various provider directed structured tasks, commonly included in conventional evaluations. Play-based assessments also yield trustworthy results that correlate with other measures. For example, the PAS has been found to correlate with standardized and non-standardized measures of cognition, communication, motor skills, and adaptive behaviors (Eisert & Lamorey, 1996, Fewell & Rich, 1987, and Finn & Fewell, 1994) and the PIECES guidelines were found to have high interrater reliability (Kelly-Vance & Ryalls, 2005). Kelly-Vance and Ryalls (2005) further noted that, "...parents and early childhood educators preferred the TBPA model to more traditional information yielded from stargazed tests" (p. 552).

While play-based assessments alone might not yield the types of standardized scores some programs require to assist with the program's eligibility determination, assessing a child through natural play is more culturally sensitive and more contextually relevant to a child than conventional standardized evaluations. Assessing play can also support intervention in ways that standardized tests cannot.

Drawing upon their review of past and current play-based assessments, Kelly-Vance and Ryalls suggest that non-facilitated play is the best practice for assessing as it actually ensures a more consistent administration approach and avoids the

pitfalls of eliciting a behavior that is not yet in the child's repertoire. Instead of direct play facilitation, a better practice is to encourage the child with verbal praise, engage in child-directed play, and redirection, for example, "What else can you play with?"

Play and playful interactions are part of children's learning context. Play expands their attention to task; it hones trial and error problem-solving methods, provides opportunities to demonstrate creativity, and shows understanding of pretend and fantasy play. Play-focused assessment also facilitates an assessment partnership with the parents because parents and providers can sit side by side and watch the child's development unfold before their eyes. For example, when the parent and providers see the child repeatedly reach for his toes and bring them to his mouth they are seeing the same behavior and together they build an authentic assessment of the child. The parent can share other observations (e.g., yes, he just started doing this and he seems to be good at getting both feet into his mouth one at a time). The providers can help the parent understand what this means in the context of child development (e.g., he is seeking to learn more about the things around him, in fact, his new toe sucking behavior can even be soothing for him. It also shows us that he has progressed from just looking at things to now touching and mouthing).

If we are to understand how a child plays and uses play to understand their world we have to see it in action. Think about the families you work with, what do you know about nuances of their child's play and playful interactions? Is there room for more play-based assessment? How might you go about that?

Kelly-Vance, L., Ryalls, B. O., (2008). Best Practices in Play Assessment and Intervention. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best Practices in School Psychology V* (pp. 549-560). National Association of School Psychologists.



What do the data say?

What are parents perceptions about authentic assessment?

To help answer this question we look to a study by Macy, Thorndike-Christ, and Lin (2010). These researchers examined parents' perceptions of conventional and authentic play-based assessment by surveying parents following their participation in an authentic and conventional evaluation with their child. An earlier study (Kim, 1996) found that parents were more satisfied and reported gaining more useful information from the authentic assessment approach compared to the conventional evaluation. This study was an expansion of the earlier study, whereby parents participated in both assessment methods. One of the research questions included in this study was, Is there a difference in parents' satisfaction between authentic and conventional testing?

Included in this study were 102 children ages 6 months to 36 months. The minority (n=28) of the children were those who were already eligible and receiving early intervention services and the remaining (n=74) were typically developing children. Parents participated in both assessment types and responded to a survey following each assessment. The assessments took place on different days. The authentic assessment used the AEPS and was play-based whereby the children engaged in a variety of play activities. The BDI-2 was the conventional test administered.

Of course we know that not all families share the same perspectives, but the results of this study did evidence a statistically significant difference between parents' responses regarding their perceptions of their *child's familiarity with the assessment activities* and their perceptions of *the kinds of things their child typical engages in doing*. For both of these points parents rated greater satisfaction with the authentic play-based assessment compared to the conventional test. In this study, the parents also

reported greater overall satisfaction with the authentic assessment activities.

Authentic assessment of children doing what they typically do, in their typical settings, with familiar things and people, is important for seeing what a child does naturally, understanding a child's functional abilities, and learning about the child's interests. All of which are important for supporting and scaffolding children's learning. Authentic assessment also promotes family-centered support by encouraging and respecting family participation in the assessment process. It facilitates family capacity building by promoting their knowledge of their child's functional abilities. It also facilitates family and provider collaboration by encouraging side-by-side work to learn about the child's development to achieve the family's priorities. There is a growing body of research that supports the use of authentic assessment in different processes and for various purposes in early intervention. As you think about assessing young children consider the following.

"Young children, who have a limited repertoire of behaviors that can be assessed, may best be studied through observation. In fact, to assess young children, who are unable to express themselves fully with words, with any method other than direct observation may not be possible. Further, young children reveal themselves through their behaviors. Unlike older children and adults, the young are incapable of hiding their feelings, ideas, or emotions with socially approved behaviors, so observing them often yields accurate information."

(Seefeldt, 1990, p. 313)

Macy, M., Thorndike-Christ, T., & Lin, Y. (2010). Parental reports of perceived assessment utility: A comparison of authentic and conventional approaches. *Infants & Young Children*, 23(4), pp. 286-302.



Consultation Corner

From February through July 2017 we are excited to have

Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak as our Consultation Corner expert. During this series Kristie will address a variety of questions that will help us *Authentically Explore Children's Play*.

Q: What is and is not authentic assessment?

A: The most common way authentic assessment is defined is by using the word familiar. Thus, authentic assessment is a process of gathering information by familiar people, in familiar settings, with familiar objects. In a nutshell, authentic assessment allows all team members to learn what children know and can do.

This approach is different from a traditional or conventional assessment approach, which tends to rely upon standardized tests or other formal procedures. More conventional approaches also typically occur in a single setting (e.g., at a table) and at a single point in time. Authentic assessment, on the other hand, is conducted during everyday activities and events, across time, across materials, and across settings.

When working with parents and other caregivers, it may be important to share how you define authentic assessment. Further, you may need to highlight that assessment, intervention, and play can be thought of as synonyms. This means, when parents and other caregivers are doing the following things, they are actually engaged in authentic assessment:

- observing and learning what a child knows and can do
- supporting a child's development and learning
- being a good play partner

Q: What are important activities and tools for assessing the sophistication of children's play?

A: The most important thing to remember, when any team member is involved in assessing a child's play, is to be a good play partner. Good play partners are those who foster strong relationships and get neurons to fire. And as Dan Siegel and other neuroscientists remind us, "neurons that fire together, wire together." To foster strong relationships, families and other team members need to match their pace and expectations with the child's pace and expectations, guide a child's actions and attention, and instill curiosity and a sense of joy during daily interactions.

On the heels of being a good play partner, the other thing teams do when assessing children's play is to be good observers. Watching and listening, versus directing and telling, creates more opportunities for families and other team members to learn what children know and can do. When families and other team members watch and listen carefully, they are better able to scaffold and support a child's development and learning, know when to pause and when to prompt, and how to read a child's cues.

More specifically, when a team wants to authentically assess a child's level of play, their primary tools are to "sit beside" the child, watch, and then enter into the child's play at his/her level. In fact, the root word assess, means "to sit beside." By watching first, families and other team members are able to gather clues from the child in terms of his/her

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readiness to interact, when the child is interested in using a toy in a more complex way, and/or when to change the pace and direction of the play.

Q: How can authentic assessment be done effectively?

A: Authentic assessment practices vary across purposes and programs. That said, there are at least three things families and other team members can do to effectively engage in authentic assessment practices.

First, team members re-believe in the child. This means starting the authentic assessment process by assuming competence. One way to assume competence is to answer a question my colleague, Barbara Avila of Synergy Autism Center, challenges families and other team members to consider, “Do you believe the child would do it if they could?” This question forces teams to consider if they recognize when a child is making a conscious choice and when a child needs their support to demonstrate greater independence.

Second, team members recognize that routines reign supreme. This means, they gather information about children (aka assess children) across all daily activities and events. For example, they assess when changing diapers, when shopping, when getting children ready to go outside, or when reading a book.

Lastly, teams effectively engage in authentic assessment when all members understand why a child may be struggling or why development has stalled. To gain this understanding, team members start by reflecting upon the clues they have collected and then aim to identify the underlying issue or concern. For example, based upon team reflections and consideration of the clues, they may determine the concern is related to how quickly the child acts, versus how much assistance he/she requires, or how well the child can control impulses versus a need for more learning opportunities. Having a clear understanding of the underlying reasons why a child may be struggling or why development has stalled will serve the team well as they work together to set goals and embed interventions across daily activities.

Now, look at these babies as if you were doing authentic assessment. What functional abilities do you see them demonstrating?



Did you notice their ability to:

- Sit independently
- Look at peers and things in the environment
- Play alongside a peer
- Reach with their hands to touch a peer
- Accept a variety of sensory experiences by orienting (e.g., turning, looking, reaching, moving toward) to sensory stimuli (e.g., auditory, visual, tactile)
- The baby in the yellow T-shirt also holds his block in one hand

What else do you see?



On the WWW

This month we're sharing a video of Megan, an early intervention physical therapist. In this video, produced by Larry Edelman, Megan talks about the value of using authentic assessment to observe children's mastery of abilities in natural settings. The video includes real life examples of Megan's observations. Megan also talks about how she uses conversations with families to learn more about what they see their child doing at

times when she cannot be there. Lastly, Megan discusses the value of using video in the assessment process.

The video and more authentic assessment resources are available at the following Colorado Department of Education website.

<http://www.cde.state.co.us/resultsmatter/authenticassessmentinearlyintervention-player>



Continuing Education for KIT Readers

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) is offering a continuing education opportunity for KIT readers.

In line with the focus on *Authentically Exploring Children's Play*, readers are invited to receive continuing education contact hours for reading the monthly KIT publications (February through June 2017) and completing a multiple-choice exam about the content covered in these KITs.

KIT readers will receive the exam in July 2017. There is no need to register for the CEUs. Rather, if you are interested complete the exam online at www.edis.army.mil

Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

KIT Newsletters
are available
online at
www.edis.army.mil

Thank you for your continued interest in the KIT.

