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**Equitable Assessment**

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University of Connecticut Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

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**Indicator 2: Equitable Assessment**

**Introduction**

**Definition of Equity**

Current literature provides a myriad of definitions for the term “equity.” While the term itself is not new, its incorporation into the world of early childhood intervention (ECI) service delivery is nascent. As the concept of equity becomes more deeply ingrained across ECI in both practice and research, it will also become more important that families and providers have a shared definition.

Existing research and organizations dedicated to the field of early childhood field assert that, overall, equity in ECI acknowledges, adapts to, uplifts, and amplifies families’ individual strengths, needs, and voices (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2019; National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (NCPFCE), 2023; Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA), 2023). The literature affirms that equity within ECI requires taking intentional steps toward ensuring all children and families have access to the resources necessary to meet their individual goals regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability, or other social or cultural identities (Maryland State Department (MSD), n.d.; NAEYC, 2019). To achieve this common goal for equity within ECI, providers and educators must actively work to ensure all children and families receive the individualized support necessary to fully meet their unique potential (i.e., cognitive, social, emotional, and physical; NCPFCE, 2023).

A crucial first step toward equity in ECI environments is to build on each child’s unique set of strengths - individual, family, cultural, and communal. Effective screening and service delivery must also address the diverse backgrounds of children by incorporating community outreach that is both culturally and linguistically sensitive (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2012). Ultimately, equity within the field of ECI will result in eliminating barriers limiting positive outcomes that are a result of past and present inequities in society (MSD, n.d.; NCPFCE, 2023).

**Definition of Assessment**

Since the beginning of service delivery efforts for young children with disabilities, assessments have been used to plan and determine services. Initially, assessments focused on a one-dimensional description of each child and whether they were eligible for services instead of tuning into the child’s multitudes – their individual skills and needs (McConnell et al., 2016). Assessment tools had traditionally relied on standardized testing and the rote interpretation of resulting scores to assess eligibility. The tools had limitations when tracking the individual's development and specific skill growth (McLean et al., 2004). In recent years, assessments have been developed to target specific interventions multidimensionally, with a more formal focus on individual child development and strengths (McConnell et al., 2016; McLean et al., 2004; IDEA, 2004).

If the result of a screening or concern leads to an assessment, states must conduct an evaluation within 45 days of a referral (IDEA, 2004). The child can be eligible to receive services under certain circumstances. Under the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA), children eligible for services include those with measurable developmental delays in cognitive, physical, communication, social-emotional, or adaptive domains; those with a diagnosed condition likely to cause delays; and, at a state’s discretion, those at risk of delays without early intervention. Additionally, children who received Part C services and have turned three are eligible for preschool services under Part B (IDEA, 2004). Informed by the data collected through comprehensive assessment, services should then be individualized to meet the unique needs of each child.

The assessment process, as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), plays a critical role in ensuring that children with suspected disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (IDEA, 2004). This process, conducted by a multidisciplinary team in collaboration with families, is designed to gather comprehensive information across all developmental domains. The objective is to gain a deep understanding of the families’ strengths, needs, preferences, and interests, thereby facilitating individualized family service planning (DEC, 2014).

Central to this process is the active involvement of families, which, when coupled with a strengths-based approach, promotes self-discovery, confidence, and a sense of agency for both the child and the family (Keilty et al., 2022). To ensure this, assessments should be comprehensive, non-discriminatory, and conducted in the family's or child’s native language or preferred mode of communication, ensuring that every family's unique context is respected and understood (IDEA, 2004; ECLKC, 2024). It is imperative to address potential biases, consider cultural and linguistic diversity, and employ multiple methods to obtain a holistic view of the child's abilities (Archambault et al., 2020). Training in culturally responsive practices and ongoing monitoring are essential to maintain accuracy and individualized support in evaluations, ensuring that all children receive the support they need to thrive.

To ensure that appropriate services are used to foster child development, providers must select and utilize appropriate assessment tools, while also considering both ethical and legal guidelines (DEC, 2020; CDC, 2024). They must use this understanding to select reliable and valid tools that are suited to the developmental, cultural, and linguistic needs of the young child, their family, and the program (DEC, 2020; ECLKC, 2024). If using standardized tools, providers must also use authentic assessment such as observation and family interviews (IDEA, 2004).

This comprehensive assessment process should also integrate informed clinical opinion to ensure a thorough understanding of the child’s needs (IDEA, 2004; McLean et al., 2004). The assessment process is multifaceted, involving the administration of evaluation instruments, gathering the child’s history, and collaborating with various sources to build a comprehensive understanding of the child's development and their eligibility for services. The evaluation team may consist of qualified professionals in speech and language, cognitive, hearing, vision, child development, psychology, and physical development (ECLKC, 2024; CDC, 2024).

Assessment data must be analyzed, interpreted, documented, and shared with a strengths-based approach, ensuring that families and other providers can effectively use this information to determine eligibility, develop child and family-based outcomes, plan interventions, and monitor the efficacy of services (DEC, 2014; Keilty et al., 2022). Providers are responsible for reporting assessment results in a manner that is understandable and useful to families (DEC, 2014). Assessment should be continuous and ongoing to identify the child’s skills and needs, this is essential to continue planning for the appropriate services (McConnell et al., 2016; IDEA, 2004). The overarching aim of the ECI services is to develop a comprehensive, coordinated, and multidisciplinary system that meets the needs of all eligible children, especially those from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds.

**Purpose**

The immediate purpose of this brief is to provide information (i.e., definitions, examples, recommendations, references, resources) in support of the first of six identified equity indicators: equitable developmental screenings. This brief is intended for early childhood educators and providers delivering services to children and their families.

This brief was written as part of the “Personnel Development to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities – Early Childhood Intervention Personnel Equity Center (ECIPC - Equity)" project funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The work done was intended specifically to address Objective 1.2:

Develop materials, resources, and tools to facilitate the use of the early childhood

intervention equity-based framework as aligned with national professional organization

personnel standards, state standards, and evidence- based practice (“EBP”) in early

childhood intervention programs of study in institutions of higher education (“IHEs”).

**Definition of Equitable Assessments**

Equitable assessments involve interdisciplinary team members implementing a strength-based approach to highlight each child and family’s strengths, provide support based on identified needs, promote the types of social capital accessible to them, seek their full participation, and amplify their voice throughout the assessment process.

Such assessments are conducted by linguistically and culturally appropriate assessors with non-discriminatory, valid, authentic, and individualized tools and procedures selected specifically for use with each child.

Equitable assessments conducted in partnership with parents and caregivers embrace the primary role of the family in a child’s development and learning, reflect a well-rounded picture of a child’s current skills and abilities, include the hopes and expectations families have for their children, and honor each family’s values, languages, and culture.

Using universal design procedures to identify a child’s strengths throughout an equitable assessment yields information necessary to support their full engagement (i.e., learning, social, emotional, physical) in learning opportunities in a meaningful and equitable manner.

**Recommendations**

* Uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family (ECTA, 2023; Maryland State Department (MSD), n.d.; NAEYC, 2019)
* Gather information about the hopes and expectations families have for their children’s behavior, learning, and development so that you can support their goals (Early Head Start (EHS), 2012; ECTA, 2023; MSD, n.d.; NAEYC, 2019)
* Use authentic assessments that seek to identify children’s strengths and provide a well-rounded picture of development (ECTA, 2023; NAEYC, 2019; NCPFCE, 2023)
* Ensure that any formal assessment tools are designed and validated for use with the children being assessed (i.e., linguistically and culturally appropriate assessors/assessments; ECTA, 2023; NAEYC, 2019)

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