

# Current Trends

## Preschool Assessment: Implications for Counselors

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Paget, K.D., & Nagle, R.J. (1986). A conceptual model of preschool assessment. *School Psychology Review, 15*, 154-165.

Wilson, C.C. (1986). Family assessment in preschool evaluation. *School Psychology Review, 15*, 166-179.

Preschool assessment is a topic rarely encountered in the professional counseling literature. But with the increasing emphasis being placed on early childhood learning experiences and emotional development, it is important for counselors to become more knowledgeable about recent developments in this field. Public education is playing an increasingly important role in early identification programs for children from birth to 5 years of age. Also, schools are being considered as an appropriate agency for administering educational programs for such children. This is particularly the case with respect to handicapped preschool children, many of whom receive services mandated by federal and state legislation.

The preschool education of children without handicapping conditions is also receiving considerable attention. For example, the Virginia Governor's Commission on Excellence in Education (1986) recently recommended that Virginia school divisions provide developmental preschool programs for 4-year-old children. The commission recommended that programs for "at-risk" 4-year-olds should be available by 1988 and for all 4-year-olds by 1992. With such emphasis on providing public education for handicapped as well as nonhandicapped children, assessment of learning potential and emotional problems and assessment for program evaluation purposes will become more important. As with other levels of assessment, various school personnel will be involved, including school psychologists, school social workers, teachers, and school and agency counselors.

A recent issue of the *School Psychology Review* was devoted to the topic of preschool assessment, and two of the articles in that issue are reviewed here for their relevance to counselors. Paget and Nagel opened the issue with an excellent article that provides a conceptual model of preschool assessment. First, they discussed the historical and legislative background for preschool assessment and noted that there are two major forces through which attention has been focused on this area. One is the work of such developmental-educational psychologists as Piaget, Guilford, Bruner, and Bloom, whose research supports the importance of the preschool years in children's acquisition of the basic foundations for later school learning and behavior.

The second major factor relates to federal legislation. Paget and Nagel noted that federal programs such as Head Start

had a major impact on the development of early preschool assessment efforts. This program and other federal legislation (e.g., the Maternal Child Health and Mental Retardation Act of 1964, the Educational Opportunity Act of 1964, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) directed attention toward the necessity of effective program evaluation and, thus, valid preschool assessment instruments. Additional federal support for early identification and intervention programs came with the 1968 Handicapped Children's Early Education Assistance Act, the 1974 Education of the Handicapped Amendments Act, the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and, most recently, the 1983 Education of the Handicapped Amendments Act, which included improvement of services to handicapped preschoolers as a major initiative. Both the 1975 and 1983 acts represented major steps toward ensuring that assessment techniques are extended beyond mere identification and will serve as guides to individualized educational planning.

### TYPES OF PRESCHOOL ASSESSMENT

Paget and Nagel included a major section in their article on the basic purpose and types of preschool assessment. They indicated that a preschool child may be evaluated for a variety of reasons, including screening, identifying and diagnosing learning and emotional problems, determining progress in special programs, and evaluating programs. Of particular relevance to school counselors is the section dealing with screening. Screening assessments are designed to evaluate large groups of children with brief, economical (usually group) procedures to determine which children may experience learning or behavioral problems. Many elementary counselors are or will be actively involved in various screening programs.

The authors recommended that, to make preschool screening effective, a case finding or outreach program be established that involves initial contact with parents, health professionals, preschool centers, and community agencies. Children identified as having high potential for learning or behavioral disabilities should be referred for more extensive evaluation to determine their eligibility for special services. Normally, counselors, teachers, and psychologists also use diagnostic and screening data to formulate intervention strategies.

Finally, Paget and Nagel proposed an ecological model of preschool assessment in which it is recognized that several environmental factors affect young children's development (e.g., family, socioeconomic factors) and that these factors interact with each other. They also suggested in their model that no single assessment strategy is appropriate for all children; rather,

one should select from various assessment strategies that take into consideration the particular presenting situation.

### FAMILY ASSESSMENT

Family assessment is the topic of the other article to be reviewed. Wilson indicated some surprise that family assessment does not receive significant attention in educational literature, especially considering the central role of the family in school adjustment and performance. In this article, the author discussed the importance of family assessment in the evaluation of preschool children, factors relating to individual and family interaction, community contributions to behavioral and learning problems, and various techniques for such assessment.

Wilson made a strong case that many problem parent-child relationships become established before the child is 6 years of age and that these faulty relationships can interfere with psychological and educational growth. Thus, consideration of family interaction is an essential component of preschool assessment, and the sooner intervention plans are developed and implemented, the higher the probability of success. Assessment is an integral part of preschool prevention and intervention planning and should include individual family members, the family as an ecological system, and the interaction between the family and the community.

#### Framework for Family Assessment

Wilson suggested the use of Conger's (1981) ecological systems approach to family assessment. This approach focuses on assessment at three different levels. At the individual level, factors include the parents' social backgrounds, affective status, and the behavioral characteristics of each family member. At the family system level, family members' perceptions of one another and interaction styles are assessed. The third level involves the community and includes such aspects as social position, contacts with persons or social agencies outside the family, and social relationships.

#### Assessment Strategies

There are various strategies that counselors can use in the above three-level system of family assessment. These strategies include interviews, observational procedures, participant observation, and such self-report approaches as questionnaires and self-monitoring.

The interview is usually the first contact the counselor or psychologist has with the preschooler's family, and the results of the interview may have a major impact on later assessment plans. The family interview is designed to gather relevant developmental and historical information and to identify and detail child and family problem behaviors.

Naturalistic observation is a second family assessment technique. This strategy represents the most direct and least inferential assessment procedure. It is characterized by the systematic monitoring and recording of behavior in natural environments and is frequently used in family assessment.

A number of formal and informal coding systems have been developed to describe family-child interactions. Analogue observation is a third family assessment procedure and involves the systematic observation of family members in a controlled environment, usually a laboratory setting. Analogue observations of parent-child interactions normally include such formats as dyadic interactions, structured play, and parent-child games. Typically, these activities are monitored by observers from behind one-way mirrors. Correlation research between behaviors

observed in analogue and natural settings suggests that one should use caution in generalizing behaviors between the two types of settings.

Participant observation is the fourth type of family assessment addressed by Wilson. This technique is a variation of naturalistic observation in which the observers are part of the target environment (children or parents) and provide information about interactions in the family.

The fifth and final type of family assessment discussed by Wilson is the general category of self-report techniques. Questionnaires, rating scales, and various types of checklists are cost effective and useful self-report sources of information on family interaction and child behavior. Many of these instruments are available for children, including the Behavior Problem Checklist, the Child Behavior Checklist, and the Children's Depression Inventory. Various instruments to assess parental adjustment and attitudes include the Beck Depression Inventory, the Knowledge of Behavioral Principles as Applied to Children Test, the Parent Attitudes Test, and the Marital Adjustment Test. Self-monitoring is another type of self-report assessment approach that involves systematic self-observation and recording of specified behaviors. In family assessment, parents might monitor the occurrence of their own positive or negative reactions to child behavior. Self-monitoring has been shown to be useful with school-aged children but not with preschool children. Thus, it should be used with caution, if at all, with children of this age.

Wilson concluded by indicating that the preschool children must be evaluated in the context of their family and environmental settings. Also, because of the interactive nature of behavior and environment, preschool assessment should be comprehensive and should include the individual, the family, and the community.

### DISCUSSION

Although we have concentrated on only two of the seven articles in the special issue of the *School Psychology Review*, the other five also address important issues in preschool assessment. These issues include curriculum-based preschool assessment, cognitive assessment, social and emotional assessment, and the neuropsychological assessment of preschool children. Although most counselors now use preschool assessment infrequently, the need for such assessment will increase as the age range served by schools is extended downward. As with most types of assessment, preschool assessment is the responsibility of a variety of professionals, including teachers, psychologists, social workers, and counselors. Because there will be a greater need for preschool assessment in the future, counselors will play an increasing role in providing such services. For those interested in preparing themselves for a role in this important process, this special issue of the *School Psychology Review* is an excellent place to start.

### REFERENCES

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