

Testing Four- and Five-Year-Olds: Response to Salzer and to Shepard and Smith

Developmental screening and readiness tests are potentially useful when each is used for its intended purpose. One cannot be substituted for the other.



Photograph courtesy of Barbara Day

The articles by Shepard and Smith and by Salzer make critically important points about testing young children—points that should be considered by everyone who establishes policies for four- and five-year olds. Chief among these points is that school readiness tests cannot be used appropriately for prediction and class placement. The data obtained by means of such tests—for example, the Metropolitan Readiness Tests (Nurss and McGavran 1976), the Gesell School Readiness Test (Ilg and Ames 1972), and the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery (Boehm and Slater 1977)—are intended to describe a child's current level of skill achievement or preacademic preparedness. These entry-level skills are not strongly associated with those outcomes that are measured by tests, grades, or retention practices (see Meisels in press). If one's goal is to predict quickly whether a child might have difficulty succeeding in school, or could profit from a specialized educational placement, then a different kind of test must be used: one with predictive validity, developmental content, and normative standardization. Tests that have these properties are known as developmental screening tests. Examples include the Early Screening Inventory (Meisels and Wiske 1983), the McCarthy Screening Test (McCarthy 1978), and the Minneapolis Preschool Screening Inventory (Lichtenstein 1980).

Thus, the answer to the question, why test four- and five-year-olds? depends on the goals of the individuals who select and administer the tests. Different goals call for different kinds of tests, and some of the most common abuses of testing are attributable to the use of tests in situations for which they were not designed.

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Table 1

Criteria For The Selection of Developmental Screening Instruments

1. It must be a brief procedure designed to identify children who may have a learning problem or handicapping condition that could affect their overall potential for success in school.
2. It must primarily sample the domain of developmental tasks rather than the domain of specific accomplishments that indicate academic readiness.
3. It must focus on performance in a wide range of areas of development, including speech, language cognition, perception, affect, and gross and fine motor skills.
4. It must have classificational data available concerning the reliability and validity of the instrument.

(From Meisels [1984])



Teachers who select readiness tests that reflect their values and approach to curriculum planning can use information from readiness tests to make initial curriculum decisions and design individualized programs.

What Kinds of Tests Should We Use?

Developmental screening tests and school readiness tests represent the two most widely used kinds of tests for prekindergarten and kindergarten-age children. Neither test should ever be used to label children or assign them to diagnostic categories. But beyond this similarity these two types of tests differ from each other in purpose, content, standardization procedures, and psychometric properties. Developmental screening tests are used to identify children potentially in need of special education services. Readiness tests focus on a child's relative preparedness for benefiting from a specific preacademic program or curriculum. Developmental screening tests display a child's ability or potential to acquire skills, while readiness tests identify current skill achievement, performance, and level of general knowledge. Screening tests are norm-referenced and should have excellent reliability and predictive validity. In contrast, readiness tests are typically criterion-referenced, and have reliability, but usually only construct validity (see Meisels 1984 and 1985 for explanations of these terms).

These differences between the two kinds of tests underlie the differences in their use. Developmental screening tests are intended to predict which children will be high-risk or handicapped learners—although only screening tests with well-established validity can accomplish this goal. Readiness tests should not be used for prediction or placement. They inform us about a child's current status but give little information about a child's potential to move to another level of skill.

In short, two kinds of tests can be of value to educators working with four-

Table 2

Criteria For The Selection of School Readiness Tests

1. It should be designed to test briefly the relative preparedness of children to participate in a specific pre-kindergarten or kindergarten program.
2. Its content should be consistent with the educational values and curriculum goals of the educational program the child is about to enter.
3. It should be criterion-referenced, wherein a child's performance is indicative of a specific level or degree of mastery, rather than norm-referenced, in which a child's performance is compared to the average performance of a standardization sample.

and five-year-olds. *Screening* tests provide a brief assessment of the developmental abilities highly associated with children's future school success. *Readiness* tests are concerned with which curriculum-related skills a child has already acquired. But one cannot be substituted for the other. If a school administrator or teacher wants both kinds of information, then both kinds of tests should be administered.

Which Tests Should We Adopt?

After deciding what *kind* of test to administer, one of the next questions concerns *which* test to adopt. Descriptions of screening and readiness tests are available from many sources (e.g., Barnes 1982, Lichtenstein and Ireton 1984, and Meisels 1985). But more important than lists of tests are the criteria that should be applied to any test to ascertain if it will be an appropriate instrument.

Listed in Table 1 are four criteria for the selection of developmental screening tests (see Meisels 1985 for a complete explanation of these criteria). Criteria for the selection of school readiness tests are presented in Table 2.

However, testing is not an end in itself. It should only be used to obtain the best and most appropriate services for the greatest number of children. If the results of testing are not used—or are not used correctly—then testing should not take place. It is essential to understand how test data can be used appropriately to improve educational practice.

“Testing . . . should only be used to obtain the best and most appropriate services for the greatest number of children.”

“Tests should not be used to deny children services or to place them in special classes without the benefit of a complete diagnostic evaluation.”

After Testing—What?

Developmental screening tests have two principal uses. They identify children who need further evaluation in order to determine if they are in need of special educational services. They can also be used to sort out children who are at risk for school success, but who do not require special educational evaluation and intervention. Such children fall between the usual “OK” and “refer” categories, and most developmental screening tests suggest that these children be rescreened after six to eight weeks. If they remain within this area of risk, they should receive a modified classroom program designed to meet their individual needs.

School readiness tests are intended to facilitate curriculum planning, not to identify children needing special services. Teachers who select readiness tests that reflect their value system and approach to curriculum planning should be able to use readiness information to make effective initial curriculum decisions and to design individualized programs.

Thus, for both screening and readiness testing, using appropriate tests for acceptable purposes will yield information that, when linked to individualized program planning, can improve a child's first-time-to-school

experience. This is the sole justification for testing four- and five-year-olds. Tests should *not* be used to deny children services or to place them in special classes without the benefit of a complete diagnostic evaluation. If tests are to be used with young children, they should be used to open school doors, not to close them. □

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Samuel J. Meisels is Professor, School of Education, and Research Scientist, Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.

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