


The Wishing Star
Lapointe Psychology Services


To Test or Not to Test: Embracing the Complexity of Assessment for Infants & Young Children

Dr. Vanessa Lapointe, R. Psych.
The Wishing Star – Lapointe Psychology Services




Our Plan

- Overview of some of the basic issues in early childhood assessment
- What about those labels?
- What are some of the practical challenges with early childhood assessment?
 - Measures
 - The uniqueness of assessment with the young child
- Issues around who the assessors are and how they engage in assessment
- Ethics in early childhood assessment
- Where to from here?




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INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW



Goal of Effective Assessment

- To acquire new information and understanding that will help facilitate the child's development and ability to function well in their multiple environments.....



Being a consumer...

- Understanding tests, how they are designed, what the results mean, and what to do with those results is as important for the person who receives the assessment results as it is for the person who gives the assessment results or administers the test.
- You must know how to be good consumers of assessment results to optimally support the children and families with whom you work.



Being a consumer...

- Being a good consumer does not necessarily involve knowing each test and each area of development inside and out!
- But it does involve being constructively critical of approaches to assessment, of communication during the assessment process, and of the outcomes of assessment



The 5 Commandments of Understanding Test Results

Dr. Ford:

1. Thou shalt know the difference in types of tests
2. Thou shalt know the difference in different types of test scores
3. Thou shalt not use thy test like a crystal ball to predict the future
4. Thou shalt ask questions and make people who administer tests answer thy questions in language thou can understand



The 5 Commandments of Understanding Test Results

5. Thou shalt
KNOW THY TEST
and not use its results in vain



Early childhood assessment is a field in transition. Dominated from its inception by psychometric models and measurement strategies used with older children, it is only now beginning to forge a methodology that is unique to young children.

Meisels & Atkins-Burnett, 2000



The good, the bad, and the ugly

LABELS



Diagnostic Systems

- Many different diagnostic systems exist within and across “areas” of practice
- For example, in mental health, the most common are:
 - The DSM-IV:TR
 - The DC:0-3 R

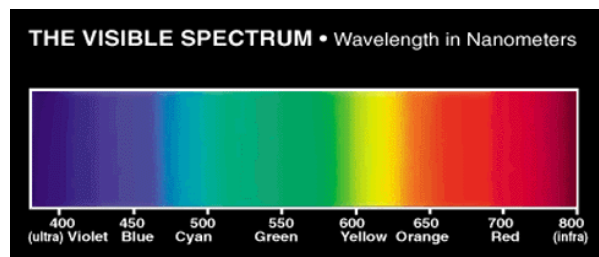


A Problem of Definition

- Things can be defined either categorically or dimensionally.
- Categories work best where there are clear boundaries between things and where members of a class are homogeneous.
- Dimensional definitions work best where the above is not the case.



A Problem of Definition



A Problem of Definition

- The most common diagnostic systems follow a categorical approach to diagnosis
- However, many times this categorical approach brings with it huge assumptions that can make it very difficult to effectively understand the underlying challenges, much less move to adequately support a child with those challenges
- For example, DSM is categorically organized even though “there is no assumption that each category of mental disorder is a completely discrete entity with absolute boundaries dividing it from other mental disorders or from no mental disorder” (p. xxii; DSM IV:TR)



A Problem of Definition

- Major Depressive Episode can range from symptoms only slightly more than normal sadness to the most severe disorder encountered in clinical practice.
- Two individuals can meet criteria for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder without sharing a single criteria.



A Problem of Definition

- Best to view diagnosis as a prototypal approach to a “fuzzy set” problem.
- Polythetic approach of the diagnostic criteria
 - The more polythetic the approach, the better!



What is a diagnosis?

- Diagnostic criteria in each of the main Diagnostic systems are essentially prototypal descriptions of symptom clusters at the syndromal level that would appear to reflect how various exceptionalities manifest themselves generally.
- They are not meant to be absolute truth but rather an expression of our current state of understanding.



What do we do with diagnoses?

- There are significant ethical considerations to be respected when considering the diagnostic world
 - Children are often “identified” by their diagnosis
 - Children are often “pigeon-holed” into interventions that “match” their diagnosis when these interventions
 - Diagnoses don’t necessarily spell out the underlying challenges but instead might just describe the observed symptoms
 - What if we got it wrong?
- Many support and funding programs are dependent on diagnostic labels as qualifying criteria
 - Labels can be used to advocate



Do Assessment Measures for Young Children Provide
Dependable and Accurate Outcomes?

PSYCHOMETRICS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT



Measurement Challenges in Assessing Young Children:

- Poorly developed instruments
- Poorly defined purposes
- Lack good theoretical underpinnings
- Scores that are available
- Psychometric properties of the test
- Limited domain coverage



Assessment



*What population
was this test
“normed” on?*



How do standard test scores “behave”

- They typically do not change much over time EXCEPT in the case of the young child – however, we often see “patterns” emerge over time although some children will have huge stops and starts that change this
- Difficult to document progress in part because it is tough to account for normal maturation
- There is a tendency for scores to move to the middle or average... “regression to the mean”



Overview of Relevant Technical Properties for Consideration

- Standardization Sample Issues
- Reliability Issues
- Test Floors
- Item Gradients
- Test Validity Evidence
- Cultural & Linguistic Evidence



Standardization Sample Issues

- Acceptability of norms
- Overall sample size
- Number of subjects per age intervals
- Demographic stratification of sample
 - Inclusion of children cared for in a variety of environment?



Reliability



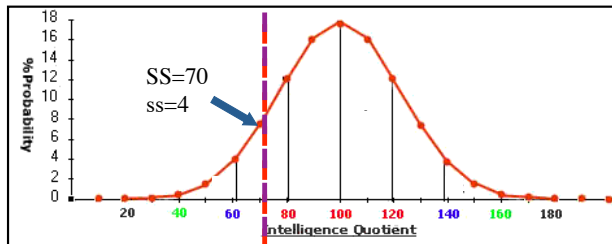
Reliability Issues

- Does the test produce the same result again and again?
- There are different kinds of reliability
- E.g. Internal Consistency
 - Scale Homogeneity
- E.g. Test-Retest
 - Score Stability over time
 - Retest sample size, age range, age interval & profile
 - Confound with trait stability

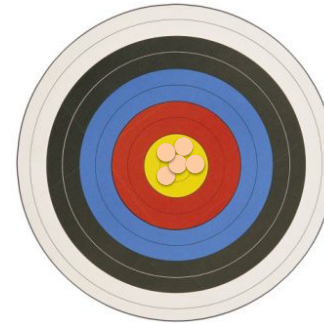


Test Floors

- Sufficient number of easier items?
- Does the (sub)test distinguish low, lower and lowest level of functioning children?
- Determines diagnostic or classification utility of test



Validity



Technical Issues in the Cognitive Assessment of Young Children

- Only recent guidelines on “minimal technical adequacy”
- The younger the child, the poorer the psychometric properties
- BUT technical properties are improving

(Bracken 1987; Flanagan & Alfonso 1995; Bradley-Johnson 2001; Ford, 2003, 2005, Flanagan and Alfonso, in press)

THE UNIQUENESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSESSMENT

On the Unique Experience of Testing Young Children

"The science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible period of time"



Bronfenbrenner, 1996 p. 513



The Challenge...

- Young children are strongly affected by contextual factors
- Changes in time and place, internal factors (hungry, tired, scared), differences in cultural background, and life events can profoundly impact children
- Values, beliefs, styles of interaction, coping strategies, and interests vary from family to family but also within families



What is "special" about young children ?

- Although development is accelerated during the preschool years, there is a predictable developmental sequence.
 - The predictable sequence leads to the use of screening and other developmental tests.
- BUT...
- Development is full of peaks and valleys
 - What if the assessment occurs during a valley? During a peak?
- Do you test a child who has just moved? Just started a new school? Just been placed into foster care? Just lost a parent or a sibling? Just suffered an injury? Just had a sibling born?



What is "special" about young children

- The language of young children differs from that of older children.
 - Language may pose a challenge to the examiner.
 - Language is an important target of assessment as well as a precursor to cognitive functioning.



What is “special” about young children

- Additional characteristics of young children that may pose a challenge to the examiner include:
 - Short Attention Span
 - Separation from parent as part of healthy attachment
 - Lack of concern with pleasing the examiner or achieving a correct response.
 - The preschool years are characterized by spontaneity, lack of self-consciousness, physical appearance.



Practices to Avoid When Assessing Young Children

- Never challenge the young child by separation from their caregivers.
- Never allow a young child to be assessed by a strange examiner.
- Do not limit your assessments to only areas that are easily measured.
- Do not use formal tests or tools as the cornerstone of the assessment – instead focus on relationships
- Acknowledge assessment in the natural environment as key



Where to find them?
What qualifies them?
Who administers which tests?

EXAMINERS



Who?

- What kind of person does it take to assess a young child in the best possible way?
- Can you be taught these skills?
- How do we find and adequately screen individuals working with families and children in an assessment capacity?
- What training programs are available that have a primary focus on assessment of the young child?
- What is your lens?



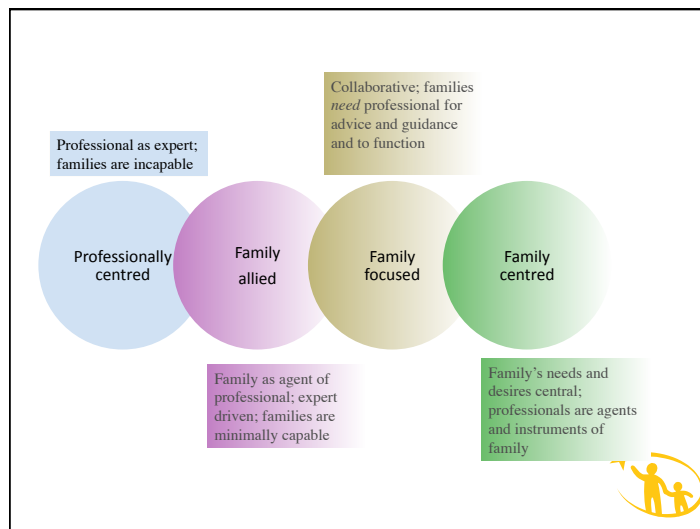
Who?

- Who is “allowed” to administer various measures in the process of assessment?
- Should assessments be conducted within one’s own realm of expertise or across realms?
- What makes the most sense to children?
- What makes the most sense to families?



Who?

- Who decides which specific areas will be assessed?
- Who decides which measures to administer?
- Is there such a thing as an “untestable” child?



Examiner Approach – Parent as Expert

- Parents know their child better than anyone else.
- Performance outside intervention environment is highly relevant
- Parents know about motivation & activity level and can gauge validity of test scores
- Parents should be a central component of data collection



On Families

“Families, like the faces and fingerprints of the people who comprise them, are all different. Opinions, values, beliefs, goals, resources, languages, style of interaction and modes of communication vary from family to family just as they vary among individuals within each family” p. 72

McLean, Bailey, Wolery, 2004



The burden of delivery

THE ETHICS OF INFORMATION GATHERING

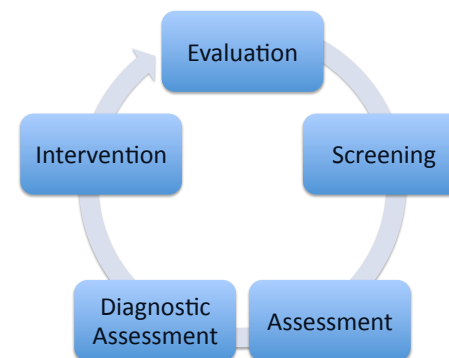


Continuum of Assessment & Intervention

- Assessment and intervention are somewhat distinct processes, but they exist on a continuum.
- Sometimes, the act of assessment becomes part of the intervention
- An original goal of the first assessments was to design intervention programs.
- The goal of any good assessment should be to design effective intervention for the child/youth and their family.



Continuum of Assessment & Intervention



Knowledge of what is does not
open the door directly to what
should be.

- Albert Einstein -



What do we do with what we know?

- If a child has been assessed and the data suggest specific interventions are appropriate, what are our next steps?
- What do we do if the intervention is not accessible?
 - Nobody provides it
 - Nobody is trained to provide it although people are available to that role if training could be accessed
 - Waitlists
 - Funding/dollars



What do we do with what we know?

- Do we have an ethical obligation to follow through on the outcomes of assessment?



With all of these challenges in mind, what then are we left with in terms of our decision of whether to test or not to test?

WHERE TO FROM HERE?



Why bother?

- In light of the significant complexity and challenge when it comes to assessing young children in ways that are ethical and responsible, why would we even bother?
- There are many ways to buffer the challenges associated with early childhood assessment in order to glean from that process the components that actually are useful in terms of understanding and supporting young children and their families.
- In fact...we *need* assessment...



Policy Makers Need Assessments to:

- Set standards
- Focus on Goals
- Monitor quality of education
- Reward/sanction practices
- Formulate policies
- Direct resources including personnel and money



Administrators Need Assessments to:

- Monitor program effectiveness
- Identify program strengths & weaknesses
- Designate program priorities
- Assess alternatives
- Plan and improve programs



Interventionists and Administrators Need Assessments for:

- Grouping decisions
- Individual diagnosis & prescription
- Monitoring child progress
- Curriculum evaluation and refinement
- Fostering mastery/advancement and other feedback
- Motivating
- Advancement



Parents Can Use Assessments to:

- Gauge child progress
- Assess child strengths and weaknesses
- Evaluate Accountability
- Be empowered to plan next steps
- Advocate for services and funding support



As a gateway to supports...

- Mandates for services.
- Improvements in medical technology.
- Growing impact of poverty.
- Family issues
- Efficacy supports early intervention.



Assumptions in the Assessment of Young Children

- To arrive in a place where we are more comfortable with the idea of assessing young children and to place ourselves in a better position of walking alongside parents and children, there are several assumptions that must be considered as the bottom line ...



General Assumptions in the Assessment of Children

- Assumption 1: Individual differences among children derive their meaning from the situation where they occur....
 - Behaviors normal in one setting may not be normal in another
 - Children differ....some ways are important, others are not
 - Development must be considered
 - Data derive their meaning from the social context



General Assumptions in the Assessment of Children

- Assumption 2: Tests are samples of behavior and only aids in decision making....
 - Test data is only a portion of the data
 - Multiple sources of information should be used in decision making
 - Consider the complex array of variables that influence learning



General Assumptions in the Assessment of Children

- Assumption 3: A primary reason to conduct an assessment is to improve instructional or intervention activities
 - Consider the goals of the assessment
 - Not just diagnosis
 - Job is not complete when a diagnosis is made.....it has just begun



General Assumptions in the Assessment of Children

- Assumption 4: The assessor is properly trained
 - A major concern
 - Not just in giving tests but the process of assessment
 - Training can occur at multiple levels



General Assumptions in the Assessment of Children

- Assumption 5: All forms of assessment contain error.....
 - Test themselves
 - The people administering them – technique, bias...
 - Same test gives different results on different occasions
 - Interpret data with caution



Effective Assessment of Young Children

- Multi-domain
- Family-Centered
- Multi-source/Multi-measure
- Inter/Multi/Trans-disciplinary
- Ecologically Valid
- Nondiscriminatory
- Formative & Summative



Effective Assessment of Young Children

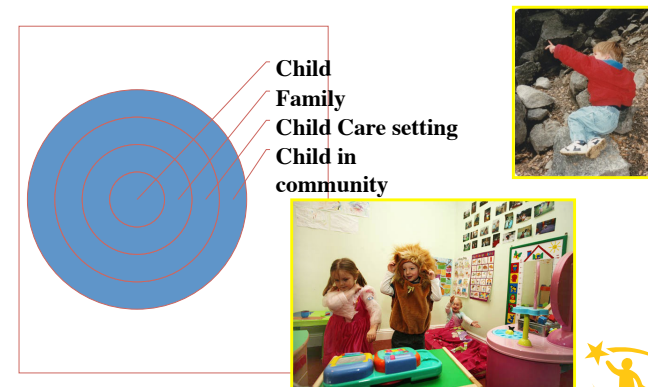


Working As Team

- Role Release
 - Allowing one team member to take on a role that might normally be the responsibility of another
- Arena Assessment
 - Simultaneous evaluation of the child by multiple professionals from different disciplines
- Consider one point person and joint evaluation reports



Child in Different Environments



Urie Bronfenbrenner

- Bioecological Theory of Human Development



The Basic Idea

- The interactions between individuals and their environment is critical to understanding individual behavior.

e.g.

- Impact of the setting
- Relationships between environments
- Nonsocial aspects of the environment



In Summary...

- Assessment for the young child is something that requires much care, consideration, and respect
- Young children are not “small adults” or “small older children” – they are unique in so many wonderful ways and this too must be respected, especially in the world of assessment
- Although many aspects of assessment present challenges and complexity, there is so much possibility for discovery and understanding



Perplexity is the beginning
of knowledge.

- Khalil Gibran -





**Dr. Vanessa Lapointe, R. Psych
& Associates**

**778-294-8732
www.lapointepsychology.com**

South Surrey, BC

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info@lapointepsychology.com

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