



# Early Childhood Teachers' Use of Ongoing Child Assessment to Individualize Instruction

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## What Do We Know About How Early Childhood Teachers Use Ongoing Assessment?

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**R**ecently, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers have placed greater emphasis on early childhood education (ECE) teachers' use of ongoing assessments to track children's progress and tailor instruction to each child's unique strengths, needs, and interests. Ongoing child assessment involves repeated assessments and observations of a child's performance and progress over time. Using ongoing child assessment to tailor or individualize instruction for each child is considered a best practice in early education programs and is a requirement in the Head Start Performance Standards.<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the use of ongoing assessment in early education, the Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation funded a project in fall 2012 to explore how teachers use children's data to tailor instruction for each child. The project's goals are to (1) review the existing literature and develop a conceptual framework of ECE teachers' use of ongoing child assessment to individualize instruction and (2) create a measurement tool to examine this process further.<sup>2</sup> This brief summarizes findings from the review of the literature<sup>3</sup> on ongoing assessment in early childhood, including what we know, what we still need to learn, and some recommended practices for using assessments to support children's learning and development.

### What do we know about ongoing child assessment practices?

Though limited research evidence is available about what teachers actually do when successfully using ongoing child assessments to individualize instruction, a review of the existing literature on this topic suggested the following:

- Teachers who use ongoing assessment to individualize instruction may reduce the school readiness gap for children at risk, deliver more effective instruction, and have students who achieve better outcomes.<sup>4</sup> The evidence is limited in both comprehensiveness and quality but points to the importance of ongoing assessment.
- Teachers might need support to overcome challenges to conducting ongoing assessment. The literature suggests that teachers value ongoing assessment but do not consistently collect or use such data. Across studies, teachers consistently report wanting more training and professional development on using data to tailor instruction.

This is one of a series of briefs about ongoing assessment for individualizing instruction.

This brief succinctly summarizes findings from a review of the literature for practitioners.

An additional brief titled "Tailored Teaching: The Need for Stronger Evidence About Early Childhood Teachers' Use of Ongoing Assessment to Individualize Instruction" describes the review of the literature on ongoing assessment in early childhood settings for researchers and practitioners in more detail.

Finally, the brief "What Does it Mean to use Ongoing Assessment to Individualize Instruction in Early Childhood?" provides a conceptual framework that shows practitioners and researchers how practitioners can use ongoing assessment for individualization.

### Definitions of Key Terms

**Ongoing child assessment:** Repeated assessments and observations of a child's performance and progress over time.

**Individualization:** The process in which a teacher uses data to identify a child's skill level for a learning goal and tailor instruction for that child. The teacher uses data on an ongoing basis to see whether the child is progressing in response to the instructional changes and adjusts instruction as needed.

- **Families can be important partners.** Studies suggest that families can help ECE professionals conduct assessments, interpret data, select learning goals and strategies, and reinforce those strategies at home. Assessment data can help families and professionals communicate more effectively about children’s progress and increase understanding of children’s strengths and challenges.

### What do we still need to learn?

**More research is needed about the ongoing assessment practices recommended by ECE professionals and researchers.** Recommended practices in assessment are discussed in the literature and incorporated in different studies, but individual practices used in ongoing assessment are not studied separately. In some studies, researchers did measure how teachers implemented an assessment, but they provided only an overall score of how faithfully teachers used that assessment and the results are specific to that assessment.

Additional research should systematically examine the steps of high-quality ongoing assessment and individualization. This will require careful study of what is needed to implement the steps that are critical for improving instructional practice and for attaining more positive child outcomes.

### Current Recommendations

The following recommended practices are based on ECE professionals’ and researchers’ cumulative knowledge, observations, and experiences.

- Assess knowledge, skills, or behaviors that a child needs to be successful, either now or in the future (for example, assess the child’s skills for communicating ideas).
- Assess in a way that makes sense to the child; in other words, the child should understand what he or she is being asked to do.
- Collect data often enough to know when a child needs more or less instructional support or challenge (for example, noting whether the length of

time that a 2 year old attends to a story each day is increasing from week to week).

- Conduct the assessment efficiently, maximizing instructional time (for example, by creating a checklist in advance so that you can record responses quickly and easily or by taking photos of children at work).
- Document what happened during the assessment rather than making inferences or judgments (for example, writing “picked his name card from a group of five - one had same initial consonant” rather than “recognizes his name in print”).
- Organize information in a way that makes it easy to examine change over time in specific skills, knowledge, and behavior (for example, noting how far a child counts with 1:1 correspondence each week).
- Draw on information from multiple time points, sources, and methods of assessment, rather than from a single response (for example, finding “b” on the alphabet chart, pointing to “b” at the beginning of a word, naming the “b” on an alphabet block).
- Consider alternative explanations for a child’s behavior or performance, developing hypotheses to test at the next instructional opportunity (for example, “Is he too hungry to pay attention to the story? Would he attend longer if I read to him after lunch?”).
- Increase or vary opportunities for learning and practice for children with weaknesses identified in the data (for example, finding opportunities to count groups less than 4 throughout the day: books, blocks, steps, cups).
- Use a variety of instructional approaches, such as flexible small groups.

For a model describing these and other professionally recommended practices and how practitioners can use them to guide their ongoing assessment efforts, see the issue brief, “What Does It Mean to Use Ongoing Assessment to Individualize Instruction in Early Childhood?”<sup>5</sup>

## Additional resources

- Akers, L., S. Atkins-Burnett, S. Monahan, J. Carta, B.A. Wasik, and K. Boller. "Issue Brief - What Does It Mean to Use Ongoing Assessment to Individualize Instruction in Early Childhood?" Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2015.
- Akers, L., P. Del Grosso, S. Atkins-Burnett, S. Monahan, K. Boller, J. Carta, and B.A. Wasik. "Research Brief – Tailored Teaching: The Need for Stronger Evidence about Early Childhood Teachers’ Use of Ongoing Assessment to Individualize Instruction." Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2015.
- Akers, L., P. Del Grosso, S. Atkins-Burnett, K. Boller, J. Carta, and B.A. Wasik. "Tailored Teaching: Teachers’ Use of Ongoing Child Assessment to Individualize Instruction (Volume II)." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2014.
- Atkins-Burnett, S., S. Monahan, L. Akers, J. Carta, B.A. Wasik, and K. Boller. "Tailored Teaching: Teachers’ Use of Ongoing Child Assessment to Individualize Instruction (Volume I)." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2014.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The full title of the project is “Assessing Early Childhood Teachers’ Use of Child Progress Monitoring to Individualize Teaching Practices.”
- <sup>2</sup> The measurement tool is referred to as the Examining Data Informing Teaching (EDIT). This tool was formerly referred to as the Tool for Tailored Teaching.
- <sup>3</sup> Akers, L., P. Del Grosso, S. Atkins-Burnett, K. Boller, J. Carta, and B.A. Wasik. “Tailored Teaching: Teachers’ Use of Ongoing Child Assessment to Individualize Instruction (Volume II).” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example:
- Al Otaiba, Stephanie, Carol M. Connor, Jessica S. Folsom, Luana Greulich, Jane Meadows, and Zhi Li. “Assessment Data-Informed Guidance to Individualize Kindergarten Reading Instruction: Findings from a Cluster-Randomized Control Field Trial.” *Elementary School Journal*, vol. 111, no. 4, 2011, pp. 535–560.
- Buzhardt, Jay, Charles R. Greenwood, Dale Walker, Rawni Anderson, Waylon Howard, and Judith J. Carta. “Effects of Web-Based Support on Early Head Start Home Visitors’ Use of Evidence-Based Intervention Decision Making and Growth in Children’s Expressive Communication.” *NHSA Dialog*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2011, pp. 121–146.
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- Landry, Susan H., Paul R. Swank, Jason L. Anthony, and Michael A. Assel. “An Experimental Study Evaluating Professional Development Activities Within a State-Funded Pre-Kindergarten Program.” *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 24, no. 8, 2011, pp. 971–1010.
- <sup>5</sup> Akers, L., S. Atkins-Burnett, S. Monahan, J. Carta, B.A. Wasik, and K. Boller. “Issue Brief—What Does It Mean to Use Ongoing Assessment to Individualize Instruction in Early Childhood?” Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2015.