

Defining Screening, Assessment, and Evaluation for Early Care and Education (ECE) Professionals

Audience: Early care and education (ECE) professionals who work with children from birth through first grade and their families. This includes those involved in Head Start and Early Head Start, Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) childcare programs, community and school-based preschool or prekindergarten programs, early childhood health and developmental screening, Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE), and kindergarten.

Purpose: Screening, assessment, and evaluation can often be misunderstood, and the terms used inaccurately. This is not surprising given that there are different definitions of these processes used by ECE programs, publishers, researchers, and organizations across services, programs, and ages/grades.

MDE reviewed a variety of resources to recommend some general definitions to help create shared language for ECE professionals around screening, assessment, and evaluation. This will also improve communication with families. Sometimes, ECE professionals may need to know more program-specific definitions of these processes depending on the program in which they work and the license or qualifications they hold. ECE professionals should consider that a family and their child may be participating in other programs or processes that use different definitions.

ECE Professionals and the Role of Parents/Guardians: Parents/guardians are entitled to be informed decision-makers in their child's care and development, and misunderstanding of the three processes can be a barrier. ECE Professionals have a responsibility to be clear in their understanding and use of these processes when communicating with families. Our goal is that parents/guardians are included as equal partners in supporting the success of their child, which is consistent with the [Minnesota Knowledge and Competency Framework](#) and [Division for Early Childhood 2014 Recommended Practices](#).

Defining the Processes: Screening, assessment, and evaluation are three separate processes used in ECE. Collectively, they answer the question "How is a child developing?" There is no order or set sequence to these three processes. Some children and their families might be involved in one or more processes simultaneously and at multiple times throughout their ECE experience.

None of these processes should be used to: (1) determine whether a child should or should not enter/enroll in public preschool, prekindergarten, or kindergarten; (2) justify a deficit-oriented narrative of a child or family; (3) encourage, promote, or practice developmentally inappropriate instruction; or (4) place judgement on children, educators, or programs.

Screening

What is screening? Screening is a quick process facilitated by trained professionals using a standardized tool in partnership with families to: (1) identify areas of strength or concern by domain or area (2) determine if additional information is needed and/or (3) inform policy makers if systems are equitably and inclusively supporting children and families, particularly those who have been traditionally underserved or marginalized. There are various types of screening (e.g., hearing, vision, health, emergent literacy, language, or developmental). After screening, a child may be referred for a health or mental health assessment/evaluation, English Learner program, or an educational evaluation. The child's family may be connected with resources that are culturally responsive and linguistically and developmentally appropriate.

What question(s) does screening help us answer? "Does this child need a closer look or what support(s) *might* need to be offered?"

Who screens? Trained health, language, and ECE professionals.

When and where does screening take place? Professionals screen children according to recommended and required age- or grade- intervals from birth to age 22. Screening can take place in a variety of settings including clinics, Head Start, the Follow Along Program, family home visiting programs, childcare programs, and schools.

Early Childhood Health and Developmental Screening (ECS): Is a specific type of screening. It is a check-in with a family about how a child is seeing, hearing, growing, moving, talking, and behaving. ECS must be offered by Minnesota districts at no cost to families from age three to or within the first 30 days of kindergarten or first grade, see [Screening Requirements](#). While ECS is considered a “universal screening” (i.e., all children in this age range should be screened), families may decline or opt out by contacting their school district.

Assessment

What is assessment? Assessment is a process of gathering evidence of a child’s development and learning and using it to inform decisions about children’s learning experiences and instruction. Assessment is sometimes referred to as a “child assessment” or “early learning assessment.” Assessments should be “developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children’s daily activities, supported by professional development, inclusive of families, and connected to specific, beneficial purposes” (NAEYC Position Statement on Early Childhood Curriculum, 2003).

What question(s) does assessment help us answer? “What does a child know and what are they able to do?” and “Where is a child in their learning progression?” Answering these questions can help guide decisions around instruction and programs, resources, and services.

Who assesses? Assessments are typically conducted by providers or teachers, although other qualified ECE professionals or educators may also administer assessments.

When and where do assessments take place? Assessments may take place in the child’s program. Assessment definitions and requirements vary by ECE program and grade. The timing of when assessments take place also varies. ECE professionals should understand their program’s specific definition(s).

Evaluation

What is evaluation? Evaluation at the individual child level is sometimes referred to as the special education evaluation process and is used to determine which children are eligible for early intervention or special education and related services. For more information about the evaluation process, please visit: [Part C Post Referral Flowchart](#) and [Part B Post Referral Flowchart](#).

What question(s) does evaluation help us answer? “Is the child eligible for early intervention (birth to age three) or special education and related services (ages three up to age 22)?”

Who evaluates? Once parental consent is obtained, a team of professionals will review any existing data and gather and analyze additional information needed through multiple procedures – including parent interviews and/or questionnaires. Parents can choose to stop the process at any point and do not have to consent to services if their child is eligible.

When and where do evaluations take place? Evaluations occur after a child has been referred to the school district due to concerns regarding their development and parental consent for evaluation has been obtained. Depending on the age of the child and the programs in which the child participates, evaluations may occur at home, in a childcare setting, and/or in a school building.

Other information about evaluation: Medical evaluations cannot substitute for educational evaluations, and a family may choose to pursue a medical diagnosis regardless of the educational determination in order to access more supports and services in their community.