

# Screening and Assessment of Young English-Language Learners

Supplement to the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE Joint Position Statement on Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation

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National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

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## Adopted Summer 2005

### Introduction

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The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) in 2003 published the joint position statement “Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation: Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8.” The position statement explains what effective assessment looks like for all young children.

One of the indicators of good assessment is that it is linguistically and culturally responsive for all children, including children whose home language is not English. The aim of this document, which was requested by experts in the field, is to explain and expand on the meaning of “linguistically and culturally responsive” and to make specific recommendations so that all young English-language learners<sup>1</sup> will have the benefit of appropriate, effective assessment. All aspects of the full position statement are relevant for young English-language learners, and readers of this document should first read the curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation position statement, bearing in mind that this document serves as a supplement to the full position statement.

This supplement is intended for a range of audiences in the early childhood profession who have a stake in

the well-being of young English-language learners. It is hoped that readers will use this document to articulate their own philosophies, needs, and challenges in this area; to create or revise policies and practices; to guide the development of more resources; and to develop a forward-looking vision of how to improve the development and education of young English-language learners.

### Why now?

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A number of factors make the need for this document especially urgent, not the least of which is the dramatic rise in ethnic diversity in the United States. Citizens from diverse racial and ethnic groups now comprise about one-third of the U.S. population. Hispanics are the largest minority population; there are approximately 40 million people of Hispanic origin living in the United States. Although Spanish accounts for almost 80 percent of the non-English languages, more than 460 languages are spoken by English-language learners nationwide.

Because early childhood professionals are serving so many more young English-language learners, there is a great need for appropriate and effective assessment to support these children’s learning and development. The field lacks the assessment tools and well-trained professionals required to implement effective assessment practices for this group. Without appropriate ways to assess young English-language learners, teachers cannot make the best decisions about how and what to teach. The lack of good tools and practices can lead to underidentification of children who have special needs, resulting in the failure to provide needed services. Simultaneously, problems with the assessment of young English-language learners sometimes lead to overidentification of special needs—that is, misdiagnosing language delays

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<sup>1</sup> Although all young children are language learners, we use the term *English-language learner* to describe young children whose home language is not English, because this is the term used in research and in public policy to describe children learning English as a second language. Many of the issues discussed in this document are relevant for children learning a second language other than English. They are also relevant to trilingual or multilingual young children.

and other disabilities—resulting in children being taken out of the classroom to receive services they do not need. Compounding these difficulties are the enduring danger, stigma, and frustration that result when children are mislabeled. For these and other reasons, it is critical that the early childhood field improve its ability to screen, assess, and effectively use the results of assessments with young English-language learners.

## The right to be assessed

Young English-language learners in the United States have the right to experience ongoing, effective assessment that supports their learning and development. Through individual assessments, teachers can appreciate children's unique qualities and talents and individualize instruction; make decisions about classroom activities; identify children who might benefit from special services; and have more informed communication with families and with other professionals. Through program evaluation and accountability assessments, decision makers can make improvements in programs and services that benefit children. Young English-language learners have the right to be assessed for the same reasons and benefits as all children. Moreover, they have the right to be assessed with high-quality assessments and under assessment conditions responsive to their needs. NAEYC's belief in the right of children to be assessed stems from research and professional values.<sup>2</sup>

## Acknowledging the challenges

Because assessment is key in determining effective practices and enhancing program quality, it is of great concern when real-world obstacles stand in the way. The biggest challenge is the scarcity of appropriate assessments to use with young English-language learners. Other obstacles include difficulty attracting and retaining bilingual and bicultural staff, lack of financial resources, lack of articulated program philosophies about English-language learners, lack of community awareness about the importance of the issue, and lack of professional development opportunities, to name a few.

These conditions make it difficult to implement recommendations or improve policies and practices for the assessment of young English-language learners.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to be aware of federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and rules as well as case law guiding the provision of education, including for immigrant children.

NAEYC recognizes the gap between realities faced in the field and the vision conveyed in these recommendations. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the recommendations will help policy makers, program administrators and supervisors, assessment specialists, advocates, and practitioners know what to strive for and how to create environments for improved assessment of young English-language learners.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND INDICATORS

### 1. Using Screening and Assessment for Appropriate Purposes

#### RECOMMENDATION

**As with assessment of all young children, assessment of young English-language learners should be guided by specific, beneficial purposes, with appropriate adaptations to meet the needs of children whose home language is not English.**

Assessment of young children should occur for specific and beneficial purposes. The purpose of each assessment must be clear to those conducting assessments and others who review and use the results, and results should be used only for the purpose for which the assessment was designed. Because so few appropriate assessments for young English-language learners are available, this caution is especially pertinent in the assessment of these children.

#### INDICATORS

**1a. Screening: Young English-language learners are regularly screened using linguistically and culturally appropriate screening tools. Results of screenings are used to determine what further supports and services are needed.**

As with all children, young English-language learners should receive regular screenings. The screenings should be used with two ends in mind: (a) to detect a possible problem in areas including health and physical development, social and emotional development, and cognitive development and (b) to detect a possible problem in the area of language development, including first- and second-language acquisition.

What should differentiate screening of young English-language learners from the screening of monolingual English-speaking children are the tools used and the

patterns of follow-up after the screenings. Screenings should use linguistically and culturally appropriate tools that meet appropriate technical standards. Screenings should occur in the child's home language and English, if the child speaks some English, and screeners should accept a child's use of code-switching (i.e., using words and grammar rules from both languages).

Follow-up after screening is critical. If a potential problem is detected, further in-depth assessment with specialists should be scheduled to determine whether the problem exists, and if so, how best to address it. Because young English-language learners show variable paths to language development and because there is limited research on expected levels of language proficiency, it can be difficult to interpret the results of language screening for individual children. When results are unclear or follow-up is needed, it is important to involve specialists who can communicate in the child's home language and have expertise in the relevant areas of diagnostic assessment.

**1b. Assessment to promote learning: Assessments of young English-language learners are used primarily to understand and improve children's learning; to track, monitor, and support development in all areas, including language development; and to identify disabilities or other special needs.**

As with all young children, assessment of young English-language learners should be used primarily to understand and promote a child's learning and development as well as to respond to concerns raised by screenings. Specifically, assessment of young English-language learners should be used to (a) guide curriculum planning, teaching strategies, and the provision of learning opportunities in all areas; (b) monitor development and learning in all domains—including children's content knowledge, skills, and capabilities; (c) determine language proficiency and ongoing language development in both the child's home language and English, as appropriate; and (d) identify children with developmental disabilities or delays, emotional impairments, physical disabilities, and other conditions that indicate the need for special services.

**1c. Program evaluation and accountability: Young English-language learners are included in program evaluation and accountability systems, and culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment instruments and procedures are used. Inclusion of English-language learners in accountability systems never acts as a disincentive for programs to serve English-language learners.**

As noted earlier, young English-language learners have the right to be assessed for all of the reasons all young children are assessed and should be included in program evaluations and tracking systems so their progress as a group may be monitored and services improved.<sup>3</sup> Every effort should be made to find appropriate instruments so that these children can be included. At present, very few assessments used with young English-language learners meet the rigorous standards necessary for use as part of program evaluation and accountability. When appropriate assessment instruments and procedures are not available for children who are not proficient in English, these children should not be included in program evaluation or accountability procedures, but test developers, program administrators, and policy makers should rapidly work to find ways to include them by developing or supporting the development of appropriate assessments.

In large-scale accountability systems, assessments typically rely on standardized formal instruments. In addition to developing more appropriate and effective standardized formal instruments, policy makers and educators should proactively seek ways to include English-language learners' results from other types of assessments, such as observation-based assessments.

It is important to ensure that the inclusion of young English-language learners in accountability systems does not discourage programs from serving these children. Administrators who fear that results will reflect negatively on their program might limit or even deny services to these children. Policy makers should use assessment information to create incentives for programs to serve and promote progress in the development of young English-language learners.

Program evaluation requires that information be gathered from large numbers of children. Sampling (assessing only a representative percentage of children) is the most efficient and effective means of capturing data for accountability purposes in a way that is both scientifically rigorous and sensitive to program needs. Administrators and policy makers should include enough English-language learners in their sampling plans to permit conclusions to be reached about the effectiveness of strategies used with young English-language learners and the programs serving them.

<sup>3</sup> Assessment procedures for accountability purposes—because they are not designed or used to guide instruction or improve programs—do not directly benefit young children, and the results should never be the sole determinant of any decision made for an individual child, whatever the child's language, culture, or other characteristics.

## 2. Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Assessments

### RECOMMENDATION

**In assessing young English-language learners, great emphasis should be given to the alignment of assessment tools and procedures with the specific cultural and linguistic characteristics of the children being assessed.**

One of the indicators of effective assessments is that “assessments are designed for and validated for use with children whose . . . cultures [and] home languages . . . are similar to those of the children with whom the assessments will be used” (NAEYC & NAECES/SDE 2003, 2). In other words, assessments should be culturally and linguistically responsive and appropriate.

### INDICATORS

**2a. All screenings and assessments used with young English-language learners are culturally appropriate.**

Culturally responsive and appropriate assessments are those that occur in settings that embrace diversity and demonstrate esteem for a child’s home culture; are administered by bicultural professionals who are knowledgeable about the values and norms (especially norms pertaining to interactions) of the child’s home culture; do not include inappropriate referents to objects or words that are either unfamiliar to the child or may carry a different meaning than the one intended; and are interpreted in the context of the child’s cultural and social history.

The term *culture* includes ethnicity, racial identity, economic class, family structure, language, and religious and political beliefs. Each of these aspects of a child’s identity, heritage, and experience profoundly influence the child’s development and relationship with the world. Every child deserves learning and assessment environments that are welcoming and responsive to her or his culture. Programs should create environments that respect diversity and incorporate elements of children’s home languages and cultures. Teachers should encourage children to share family values and traditions and to communicate in their home language as well as English. Teachers who speak a child’s home language should use it, as well as English, to communicate with the child.

Adults involved in conducting and interpreting assessments must be aware of how cultural values may affect young children’s behavior and performance on assessments. Culturally shaped expectations affect young children’s ideas about interactive behaviors, such as when they are supposed to talk, to whom they

should talk, and what kind of language to use in various contexts. These factors affect performance during assessments, especially standardized formal assessments in which a child may not know the person conducting the assessment. Those assessing should make a point of knowing about a child’s culture and community so they will understand children’s behaviors and interpret responses accordingly.

Before being accepted as culturally appropriate, an assessment should be carefully examined by bilingual, bicultural professionals familiar with the culture and community in question to ensure the assessment is culturally appropriate. Culturally appropriate assessments do not contain any inappropriate referents, such as words and objects that would be unfamiliar or have an unintended meaning for a child. Differences in connotation can result in confusion, frustration, and misunderstood responses on the part of the child. If the individual conducting an assessment is not familiar with a child’s culture, a cultural guide (a qualified representative of the child’s cultural and linguistic group who can serve as a broker or mediator) should assist in the assessment process, including the interpretation of results. Interpretations of assessment results should be made only in the context of a child’s language history and cultural background.

**2b. All screenings and assessments used with young English-language learners are linguistically appropriate.**

Beyond simply translating materials into another language, linguistically appropriate assessment takes into account a child’s language history, proficiency, and dominance and preference, where applicable; has alignment between the goal of the assessment and the language(s) used to assess; is administered by a bilingual person fluent in the language of the assessment; and allows for flexibility in the child’s language of response (except when assessing for proficiency in a given language). Because of these challenges, it is important to include curriculum-embedded, observational assessments and other methods that place less reliance on children’s production or comprehension of language as a key part of the assessment. However, to some degree all assessments are measures of language, and the issues noted below are important to keep in mind no matter what the assessment purpose or approach.

**Language history and proficiency.** Planning for assessment of young English-language learners should begin with gathering information about the child’s and family’s history with language. The information should include the language the family primarily speaks at home and in the community, other languages spoken in

the home, the family's country of origin, the length of time the family has lived in the United States, the child's age at first exposure to English, and who in the family speaks English and how well. Also, for children relatively advanced in their language development, those assessing need to determine a child's language proficiency. Accurate assessment of language proficiency is important because these children may seem to be speaking English with ease when actually they are not fully capable of understanding or expressing themselves in complex ways and still lack vocabulary skills, auditory memory, ability to follow sequenced directions, and other markers of proficiency. Insights about language proficiency will help staff effectively plan learning opportunities for young English-language learners.

Assessments of language proficiency should rely only on instruments and procedures designed to assess language proficiency, not those designed to assess content knowledge or anything else. It is also important not to assume that all assessments of language proficiency measure the same aspects of language. Decision makers should carefully review information about language proficiency assessments before selection.

***Home language or English? Matching the method and purpose of assessment.*** After gathering information about the child's language history and current language proficiency, those responsible for assessment need to consider the purpose of the assessment before deciding on appropriate language(s).

If an assessment is to be used for program evaluation or accountability purposes, it should take place in the language and dialect in which the child can best show what he or she knows and can do. If the child is proficient in both the home language and English and it is unclear which language is dominant, the child should be assessed in both languages. Although it is always important that a well-trained, bilingual, bicultural professional administer assessments to English-language learners, it is especially important for these purposes.

If an assessment is to be used to guide instruction, three options could be appropriate, depending on the goal of the assessment and the child's level of proficiency: (1) assess only in the child's home language (for example, when evaluating a child's knowledge of content in a specific area, such as mathematics); (2) assess in a language in which the child is proficient, even if it is not the child's home language (this could be English or a third language); or (3) assess in both

English and the child's home language. Because of the episodic, unpredictable, and rapidly evolving nature of language development among young English-language learners, a dual-language approach is recommended, assessing in both English and the child's home language whenever possible.

***Code-switching.*** When learning a second language, children often go through a period of code-switching or code-mixing, using rules and words of both languages between one sentence and another or within a sentence, respectively. This behavior is not unusual and is not necessarily a sign of deficiency. It demonstrates children's efforts not only to practice multiple languages, but also to successfully navigate multiple cultural markers, norms, and values in order to communicate effectively. Except when evaluating language proficiency, those conducting assessments should accept responses that involve children's code-switching and code-mixing.

**2c. Translations of English-language instruments are carefully reviewed for linguistic and cultural appropriateness by native speakers well versed in the complex issues of assessment and translation.**

Assessments used with English-language learners are often translations of assessments developed for monolingual English-speaking children. It is common to assume that a translated assessment is appropriate simply because the language of the assessment is a child's home language. This assumption may not be correct. Translated materials are likely to differ from the original version in both content and construct, and those conducting the assessment should not assume a translation produces an instrument that is equivalent to the original version in difficulty, content, and reliability and validity. Translations should not use dialect, colloquialisms, and unfamiliar referents that are inappropriate for the child being assessed. Spanish-translated materials appropriate for a Mexican American child, for example, may not be appropriate for a Puerto Rican child.

Native speakers of a child's home language who are familiar with assessment constructs should carefully review translated materials for cultural and linguistic appropriateness. Likewise, test developers should establish translation equivalence before assessment decision makers decide to use translated instruments. On-the-spot translations of standardized assessments should not be used.

### 3. Characteristics of Assessments Used to Improve Instruction

#### RECOMMENDATION

**The primary purpose of assessing young English-language learners should be to help programs support their learning and development; classroom-based assessment should maximize the value of the results for teachers' curriculum planning and teaching strategies.**

The indicators discussed in this section are adapted from those outlined in the full position statement on curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation, but with special reference to implications for young English-language learners.

#### INDICATORS

**3a. Programs rely on systematic observational assessments, using culturally and linguistically appropriate tools as the primary source of guidance to inform instruction and to improve outcomes for young English-language learners.**

For informing teaching and improving learning, assessments based on observation provide the richest and most relevant, accurate, and useful data. Teachers should rely most heavily, therefore, on observational assessments such as rating scales, checklists, analyses of samples of children's work, and portfolio approaches, many of which are linked to a particular curriculum model. These methods are especially valuable in assessing young English-language learners, whose strengths and developmental needs may not reveal themselves through direct verbal methods. Observation-based assessments should be chosen with care to ensure they are sound, of high quality, and culturally and linguistically appropriate.

**3b. Assessments for young English-language learners are based on multiple methods and measures.**

No one assessment, measure, or method of collecting information about a child will provide all the information educators and others want to know. This is especially true for young English-language learners, and assessments of any aspect of their development and learning should always include several methods and measures. Because purely verbal procedures tend to underestimate children's cognitive ability, approaches should include both verbal and nonverbal procedures. As with all young children, assessments should occur across all the domains of the curriculum and should involve a range of activities. Allowing young English-language learners to express themselves in areas as

diverse as art, music, and block building gives them opportunities to demonstrate their intellect and knowledge in ways that exceed the boundaries of language. Assessments should occur across different settings, such as in the classroom, on the playground, and during interactions with peers, familiar adults, and strangers.

**3c. Assessments for young English-language learners are ongoing; special attention is given to repeated assessments of language development over time.**

There is a misconception that young children acquire language more easily and quickly than adults; in fact, with the exception of pronunciation, this is not the case. Children can, but do not necessarily, achieve social language proficiency in a second language in two to three years and academic proficiency in four or more years. Because of the long-term nature of second-language development, and because paths to proficiency are uneven and unpredictable, a snapshot approach to assessment is particularly ineffective for young English-language learners. A more accurate picture of a child's progress will reveal itself gradually over time as a child experiences a variety of social interactions and opportunities for growth in all domains. Assessments used to guide children's learning should be ongoing, with emphasis on assessment in everyday, naturalistic settings.

**3d. Assessments for young English-language learners involve two or more people.**

Conclusions about the development of young English-language learners should always be based on information from multiple sources. Assessments usually involve some interpretation and judgment on the part of those assessing, so there is room for error and bias in the assessment process. With assessments of young English-language learners, the backgrounds of those assessing—their identity, cultural stereotypes, life experiences, conceptualizations of constructs, and so forth—can influence assessment decisions. Also, adults often have different perceptions of a child's abilities, and these differences can become particularly salient when there is a linguistic divide—when adults communicate with the child in different languages. Observations or data about a child can more safely be assumed to be accurate if they are verified by several people rather than by only one person.

More than one professional (teacher, paraprofessional, consultant, and so forth) should be involved in significant assessment-related decisions about a child's progress, and at least one of these professionals should be proficient in the child's home language. In addition, at least one of the people providing input on the child's progress should be a family member.

### **3e. Assessments for young English-language learners are age appropriate.**

Because there are few assessments—and in some cases, no assessments—available for young English-language learners that are psychometrically, linguistically, culturally, *and* age appropriate, those who assess may be tempted to use an assessment designed for an age group different from the age of the child being assessed, if that assessment tool has other positive features. Despite constraints, decision makers should avoid selecting assessments that are developmentally or age inappropriate, as the results are likely to be inaccurate and uninformative.

## **4. Using Standardized Formal Assessments**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**The development of state and other accountability systems has led to increased use of standardized formal assessments of young children. Specific considerations about the development and interpretation of these assessments should guide their use with young English-language learners.**

Standardized formal assessments, or direct assessments, are typically administered at a single point in time, either orally via questions and answers or via paper-and-pencil approaches. When used appropriately and in context, these types of assessments can provide important and useful information. However, early childhood professionals should be aware of concerns about the use of many of these assessments with young English-language learners. The decision to use a standardized formal assessment with young English-language learners should be made cautiously and with awareness of the complexity of the issues involved.

### **INDICATORS**

**4a. It is appropriate to use standardized formal assessments to identify disabilities or other special needs and for program evaluation and accountability purposes. They may also contribute to monitoring and improving learning at an individual level as part of a more comprehensive approach to the assessment of young English-language learners.**

Because program evaluation assessment procedures necessarily involve large groups of children, these procedures have primarily relied on standardized formal assessments. When tools and practices are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate, it may be useful to employ standardized formal

assessments for these purposes, keeping in mind the cautions outlined in indicators 4b and 4c.

In addition, because information from standardized formal assessments allows staff to compare a child's progress against the progress of similar children, this information may offer an improved understanding of an individual child's development, if the information is viewed in a broader assessment context. It is important to emphasize that only meaningful comparisons should be made; data from English-language learners should be compared to data from other, similar groups of English-language learners and not to data from monolingual children.

**4b. Decision makers and those assessing young children are aware of the concerns and cautions associated with using standardized formal assessments with young English-language learners.**

Those responsible for making decisions about assessment systems should be aware of specific concerns about using standardized formal assessments with young English-language learners. They should know, for example, that standardized formal assessments often contain a great deal of material for which comprehension depends on children's previous learning experiences and background knowledge rather than cognitive functioning. True levels of cognitive ability tend therefore to be underestimated for young English-language learners when using standardized tests.

In addition, there are serious concerns about the validity and norming of standardized formal assessments used with English-language learners. In many cases there is simply no information about the validity of assessments used.

**4c. Decision makers and test developers carefully attend to test development issues, including equivalence and norming.**

NAEYC urges the rapid development of new and better assessment tools that will allow young English-language learners to be assessed in ways that benefit them. Two key issues need careful attention as these assessments are developed.

***Equivalence across versions.*** Ideally, standardized instruments used with populations of young English-language learners are developed through an iterative or concurrent process in which items originate from both languages of the versions being developed. Equivalence across versions of the instrument being developed must be established at several levels. First, the versions should have construct equivalence, or evidence that what the instrument measures for one child is the same

as what another version of it measures for another child. Second, versions should have functional equivalence, meaning that the activities or behaviors measured have the same meaning in each cultural or linguistic group being assessed. Third, they should have translation equivalence, meaning that if instruments are translations, they are comparable in content to the original. And fourth, they should have metric equivalence, meaning that scores from each version of the instrument have comparable psychometric properties, such as reliability and validity. The linguistic and cultural characteristics of each of the groups of children for which the instrument is intended should be reflected in the samples used throughout the processes of test design, validation, and norming.

**Norm-referenced assessments.** Norm-referenced assessments are standardized so that a child's performance is interpreted in relation to the performance of a group of peers who have previously taken the same test. These assessments lead to useful insight only when the instruments and standards have been appropriately developed and when the comparisons make sense. Norms for assessments to be used with young English-language learners should be based on the performance of other young English-language learners rather than on the performance of monolingual children—including children monolingual in the child's home language. Moreover, norms should be based on similar populations of children. If, for example, a Spanish-language version of an assessment will be used with Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Spanish children, then norms, reliability, and validity should be established for each of these groups.

At present, few assessments are normed this way. Until more appropriately normed instruments are available, those selecting assessments and using results for young English-language learners should pay close attention to how the instruments were normed and exercise caution when interpreting results.

#### **4d. Those assessing know appropriate conditions for using and interpreting standardized formal assessments with young English-language learners.**

Given the concerns, decision makers and teachers should know which assessments might be appropriate to use with young English-language learners. As noted, appropriate standardized formal assessments are those that (a) meet the highest psychometric or technical standards; (b) are used only for the purpose for which the assessment was designed; and (c) are based on norms from similar populations of young English-language learners. Again, few assessments fully meet

these requirements; assessment decision makers should therefore exercise caution in how they use information from assessments with respect to young English-language learners.

If standardized formal assessments are used, it may be appropriate to incorporate accommodations to allow young English-language learners to show a true picture of their abilities. It may be appropriate, for example, to allow greater wait time for some items, rephrase directions and questions so a child can understand them, and ask for explanations to clarify the child's thinking. Those assessing should plan for additional time in the process to (a) assess language proficiency before selecting measures; (b) obtain background information about the child; and (c) conduct additional procedures that might be necessary.

In addition, standardized formal assessments should emphasize children's progress over time, as other assessments do, and results generally should be interpreted in the context of children's progress rather than on an absolute basis.

## **5. Characteristics of Those Conducting Assessments**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

**Whatever the purpose of the assessment, those conducting assessments of young English-language learners should have cultural and linguistic competence, knowledge of the children being assessed, and specific assessment-related knowledge and skills.**

Even the most linguistically and culturally appropriate assessments may be inappropriate and ineffective if the adults who are implementing the assessments and interpreting their results lack relevant experience and preparation. This section explains who should be responsible for assessing young English-language learners and what those adults should know and be able to do.

### **INDICATORS**

**5a. It is primarily teachers who assess young English-language learners, but paraprofessionals, assessment assistants, and specialized consultants also play an important role.**

Because the primary purpose of early childhood assessment is to help teachers learn more about children in order to make informed classroom-level decisions about curriculum and teaching practices, most often those involved in assessing are—and should be—children's teachers.



Paraprofessionals (e.g., teacher aides), assessment assistants from the community, and consultants also may play an essential role in assessment of young English-language learners. Programs should be proactive in establishing a pool of assessment assistants on whom they can call as need arises; this pool might include community leaders, business leaders, and members of the clergy who are from the child's cultural and language community. Before collaboration, programs should determine that potential assistants are fluent in the child's home language and English and are familiar with the child's community. Besides directly helping with some types of assessments, these assistants may be excellent as cultural guides or mediators between home and school. They can facilitate communication and understanding and assist with translations and interpreting. However, they should not be solely responsible for administering assessments unless they are qualified and have been trained specifically to do so.

Adults with specialized professional training also play a part in assessment of young English-language learners—for example, when screening results indicate the need for in-depth diagnostic assessment or when assessments are externally administered as part of an accountability system. These individuals too require knowledge relevant to the assessment of young English-language learners and the ability to conduct assessments in the child's home language as needed. Whatever their role, it is important that professionals and paraprofessionals who are involved in any aspect of the assessment process know relevant laws and ethical issues, the purpose of various assessments, and the importance of using correct procedures.

**5b. Those assessing young English-language learners are bilingual and bicultural.**

Ideally, those assessing should be fluent in the child's home language and familiar with the dialect spoken in the child's community. Those who assess young English-language learners must appreciate diversity and show respect for the dignity and uniqueness of all people. People who hold prejudices or negative stereotypes about groups of children based on their background should not assess young English-language learners. Teachers and others assessing should know the cultural traditions, values, and beliefs of the children they assess and should be aware of generally preferred interaction styles for people from those cultures. They should know not only about the child's culture generally but also about the child's current community specifically.

**5c. Those assessing young English-language learners know the child.**

Children tend to perform better when they know and feel comfortable with the person assessing them. The person assessing should be someone with whom the child is familiar and comfortable. In the case of ongoing assessment that informs instruction, teachers conduct assessments and should therefore be familiar with the children being assessed. Early in the year, teachers may need additional time and support to build relationships that will allow for effective assessment and interpretation of results. In situations where an external professional administers assessments, that person should spend time with and develop rapport with each child before assessing.

**5d. Those assessing young English-language learners are knowledgeable about language acquisition, including second-language acquisition.**

Whether they are conducting language assessments or assessments in other domains, teachers and other professionals assessing young English-language learners should know about the development of language proficiency and specifically about second-language acquisition, both sequential and simultaneous. Too often, children from diverse backgrounds are overrepresented in special education programs, so it is important for those assessing to be aware that language errors as a function of learning stage might incorrectly lead to diagnosis of a disorder or developmental disability. Also, those assessing should know which specialists—including English as a Second Language teachers, speech and language pathologists, and reading specialists—to consult for assistance.

**5e. Those assessing young English-language learners are trained in and knowledgeable about assessment in general and about considerations in the assessment of young English-language learners in particular.**

As emphasized in NAEYC's standards for early childhood professional preparation, well-prepared early childhood professionals understand the goals, benefits, and uses of assessment, and they practice responsible, ethically grounded assessment. Those working with young English-language learners should be trained in and knowledgeable about the assessment of these children specifically, with competence in selecting appropriate assessments, soliciting information from family members, consulting with cultural guides, using translators, interpreting results, and knowing purposes for which assessments may be used. They should also know about specific ethical issues that may arise.

## 6. The Role of Family in the Assessment of Young English-Language Learners

### RECOMMENDATION

**Families of young English-language learners should play critical roles in the assessment process, being closely involved in a variety of appropriate ways.**

Families are always significant sources of information about their young children. Efforts to gather information and build positive relationships with families whose home language is not English are essential for many reasons, one of which is to create effective assessments that will benefit children. Yet family members should not be exceptionally burdened or asked to take on roles for which they are neither prepared nor responsible.

### INDICATORS

**6a. Professionals involved in the assessment of young English-language learners seek information and insight from family members in selecting, conducting, and interpreting assessments.**

Family members have perspectives on, preferences for, and observations about their child that program staff will not know unless they ask, and they should ask. Program staff should seek this critical information from parents, grandparents, and other caregivers in the young English-language learner's home, listening respectfully and with an open mind to the family's goals and concerns for the child, as well as what behaviors and skills the family observes in the child. Lack of experience with diverse families can disrupt the process of developing positive, respectful relationships between staff and family members, so one of the first things staff should determine is a family's preferred communication style. For example, they should determine whether a family prefers an informal, friendly relationship with program staff, or whether the family prefers a more formal, professional relationship. Each family is unique, so although sensitivity to general cultural differences is an important foundation for good communication, those assessing need to learn about the characteristics and preferences of individual families.

When comfortable patterns of communication have been established, staff should gather as much information as possible about each family's history and current situation, as these factors could affect a child's responses to assessments and should affect interpretation of results. Staff should know a family's country of origin, where the family currently lives, how long the family has lived in the United States, and the primary

language the family speaks at home and in the community. It is especially important to determine whether a family has any concerns about their child's language development. They also could seek to learn, in a sensitive manner, about a family's education; religious affiliation; degree of acculturation; specific accomplishments the family is proud of; what the family believes children should learn; how the parents see their role; concerns about stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination; and experiences with educational, health, and other institutions. These concerns and experiences are likely to affect families' interactions with their child's program and teachers, as well as their willingness to share assessment-related information.

**6b. Programs refrain from using family members to conduct formal assessments, interpret during formal assessments, or draw assessment conclusions.**

There are assessment practices in which it is appropriate and important to involve family members, for example, in completing observation charts used to record behaviors in the home, in completing parent rating scales or questionnaires, and in dynamic assessments involving observations of parent-child interactions.

Family members, however, are not trained in administering standardized formal assessments, and they also are less likely than professionals to be objective about the performance of their child. Aside from the types of circumstances just noted, family members should not conduct assessments of their child, nor should they serve as interpreters during formal assessments of their child. Family members should not be responsible for independently interpreting assessment results or drawing conclusions from the assessments. Because of confidentiality issues and the sensitive nature of assessment results, it is also recommended that close friends of the child's family not be involved in assessment procedures.

Program staff may find themselves in situations where the only person available who speaks both English and the child's home language is a family member, often an older sibling (or another older child in the community). Children of any age may be linguistically and cognitively ill-equipped to participate, even as interpreters, in assessment procedures; they also may be burdened emotionally by participating in an assessment of their younger sibling. Those assessing should make every effort to collaborate with a professional consultant or an assessment assistant who is familiar with a child's community but not intimately involved with the child's family. If it is simply not feasible to collaborate with a professional consultant or cultural guide, decisions about involving older children should be made cautiously on a case-by-case basis.

**6c. Professionals involved in assessment regularly inform and update families on their child's assessment results in a way that is easily understood and meaningful.**

Clearly communicating results and providing guidance about how to use the information are essential components of responsible assessment for staff working with all families; but this component is especially important for staff working with families from diverse cultures and who might have language differences. Staff should explain what the results show about the child's development in a way that is easily understood and meaningful to the family. At the same time, they should seek to understand families' interpretations of results and how the results may fit with families' goals for their children. Staff should be particularly proactive in finding clear, meaningful ways to share assessment information reciprocally and respectfully with families of young English-language learners.

## 7. Needs in the Field

### RECOMMENDATION

**Resources should be invested to ensure rapid progress on several fronts: expanding the knowledge base; developing more and better assessments; increasing the number of bilingual and bicultural professionals; and creating professional development opportunities for administrators, supervisors, practitioners, and other stakeholders in effective assessment of young English-language learners.**

The supports and resources available to those developing assessment-related policies, designing assessment tools and procedures, and directly assessing or supervising those who assess young English-language learners have not kept pace with rapidly increasing demands in the field. For the preceding recommendations to be implemented, specific actions are needed.

### INDICATORS

**7a. Scholars provide an expanded knowledge base about second-language acquisition and the development of young English-language learners.**

Professionals who work with young English-language learners need practical information about second-language acquisition. They need to know how second-language acquisition relates to cognitive, emotional, cultural, and social factors and how to monitor it effectively. They also need to know what influences the development of young English-language learners,

especially the factors that may be under their control. Researchers must help the field move forward with more fully developed theoretical frameworks and empirical research about second-language acquisition as it relates to children from various language and cultural groups. Continued efforts to develop an expanded knowledge base in this area must be supported as an essential foundation for evidence-based assessment policies and practices.

**7b. More and better assessments are developed to meet the most pressing needs.**

Those responsible for planning and conducting assessments of young English-language learners have few, and sometimes no, appropriate assessments from which to choose. Because 79 percent of English-language learners in U.S. public schools are Spanish speakers, the first priority should be to develop appropriate assessments in Spanish. In developing these assessments, assessment designers should be responsive to the within-group differences in dialect and culture that will be represented among Spanish-speaking children. Beyond these needs, research and technical expertise are needed to develop and improve assessments for young children who speak the many other languages represented in U.S. early childhood programs.

**7c. Policy makers, institutions of higher education, and programs adopt policies and practices to recruit and retain a diverse early childhood workforce, with a focus on increasing the number of bilingual and bicultural early childhood professionals.**

The field urgently needs culturally sensitive bilingual professionals who not only are proficient in conducting assessments but also can communicate with children and family members in their home language. As the demographics of the United States shift to include greater and greater numbers of bilingual and multilingual children, the need for the early childhood workforce to diversify becomes more urgent. So far, the workforce has not kept pace with the diversity of the children served.

Specifically, the field needs more bilingual professionals. Bilingual teachers will be able to support the preservation of young children's home language and culture. They help create environments that encourage young English-language learners to participate in social interactions, and they are likely to empathize with children as they attempt to learn a new language. Teachers who are not able to become fully bilingual benefit from learning even the basics of a second language.

**7d. Early childhood professionals, including program administrators, receive ongoing opportunities for professional development and support in the area of assessing young English-language learners.**

The field needs professionals who know about assessment principles and practices, how young children acquiring a second language typically develop, and the implications of second-language acquisition for assessment. Many early childhood teachers receive little preparation for working with children and families from diverse cultures. For example, only 10 percent of baccalaureate and 8 percent of associate degree early childhood programs require a course on working with young English-language learners. And simply managing day-to-day responsibilities with limited resources and time makes it difficult for teachers to attend to this need.

The burden, however, should not rest primarily on teachers. Assessments are usually selected and implemented by program administrators, who should be actively involved in assessments to improve outcomes for children and their programs. They participate by selecting good assessments for young English-language learners; monitoring assessment procedures; and assisting teachers in using results to inform curriculum and teaching practices. They are essential in creating a program philosophy and environment that reflects a coherent, knowledge-based, mission-driven approach to the assessment and teaching of young English-language learners. They too need to know about the development of young English-language learners.

Given the growing urgency and demands related to assessment of second-language learners, program administrators, teacher educators, trainers, and policy makers need to make this area a priority, investing resources and emphasizing its importance to staff, students, and the public. Professional development opportunities in the form of workshops, conference sessions, college courses, and distance-learning activities should be developed, widely accessible, and linked to incentives for participation.

## Conclusions

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If well implemented, the recommendations presented in this document would contribute to more positive developmental and educational outcomes for the millions of young English-language learners served by early childhood programs. At present, the conditions needed to fully implement the recommendations do not yet exist, although promising practices are evident in many settings—practices that need to be better identified and showcased as models. If the vision behind these recommendations were fully realized, then technically sound and developmentally, linguistically, and culturally appropriate assessments would be available for these children for all purposes and settings. The recommendations also reflect a vision in which all early childhood professionals would be fully prepared to assess diverse children in ways that support their learning and development. And the recommendations envision a policy environment with both the resources and political will to support the needs of young English-language learners and their families. At present, sufficient resources are not being directed toward these ends.

Until more resources and supports—financial, scientific, and professional—are made available, early childhood professionals will have to continue to use their best judgment, wisdom, and practical knowledge to make decisions about how to effectively assess and use assessment results for each child in their care, with the limited means currently available to them. At the same time, early childhood professionals who guide programs and work directly with the millions of young English-language learners must continue to advocate for the support and resources they need in order to fully implement these recommendations.