Developmental Monitoring, Screening and Assessment: Issues and Guidelines from First Nations Perspectives

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Indigenous Child Project: Lessons Learned
Key Point: Strengthen capacities

Research and measurement involving Indigenous peoples must begin with relationship building.

Relationships must strengthen the confidence and capacity of families to raise their own children according to their own goals and of communities to speak for themselves.
Key Point: It’s not about the bike ... !
It’s more about the process ...  

The **ways** that practitioners monitor, screen, assess & report on a child are as important as the choice of tools.
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Changing context for Aboriginal ECD

- Increasing demand for early intervention services
- Uptake of a ‘tool based’ approach to early identification
- Groundswell of cultural pride, capacity & revitalization

- Systematic approach is working well in some places & for some purposes
- Many disgruntled customers

Tools are a canned commodity
Are they really for us?
Can we make them our own?
Cultural appropriateness

“Many of us think the dimensions in mainstream tools don’t represent the totality of Aboriginal children’s development.”

“Items often present situations & objects that many Aboriginal children don’t come across in their daily lives.”

“Scoring criteria unfairly disadvantage Aboriginal children, who may be take their time to respond.”

“Aboriginal children are not comfortable telling adults answers they know the adults already know.”

“Mainstream tools are just not relevant, appropriate or fair for Aboriginal kids.”
Cultural Safety

“Sometimes I think professionals are looking for ways to say that our kids are delayed or deficient so they can take them away.”

“We don’t care to read in the newspaper about how all the children from our community got a lower overall score on readiness for school than the kids in town. It makes us want to take the kids out of that school.”

“Screening and assessment are very touchy in our community. It should be done by our own people, in a non-threatening way, after relationships have are already strong. Otherwise it can feel like just more racism.”
Balanced perspective with a focus on strengths

“We hear a lot about what’s wrong with our kids. A lot of our kids know things that white kids growing up in cities don’t know. About who their ancestors are, and how they walked on this land. About living with nature. About where their food comes from. If they haven’t started learning the alphabet by the time they go to school, it doesn’t mean they’re behind in their development.”
“We believe that every child is a gift, and has gifts. Isn’t there some way to use these observations to focus in on a child’s skills – what they CAN do – because we could work with that. If they’re good at cooking and they enjoy it, then they can be cooks. Not everyone has to be brainy to be happy.”
How can we make monitoring, screening & assessment our own?

1. Create our own content

2. Incorporate the practice of monitoring, screening & assessment within our long standing traditions of
   - Respect
   - Relationship building
   - Reciprocity
   - Renewal (or recovery)
1. Creating new tools for Aboriginal children

No tool would fit all cultural contexts or all families
Enormous diversity among cultures, between & within families
Some existing tools may be more appropriate than others.

A recent province wide scan yielded strong support for ASQ, as well as for ‘checklists’ Why?

What is ‘appropriate’?
2. Process has more impact on the experience of appropriateness than content

Current practices are too often:
- Depersonalizing
- High-handed
- Behind closed doors
- No consent
- No reporting back
- No copies
- No follow up
- No consultation
- No difference
- No use
Respectful Process Influences Outcomes

Receptivity
Cooperation
Sense of being respected
Sense of being a ‘knower’
Sense of participation
Results obtained
Involvement in follow-up
Relationships built
Building strong families
3. Parents are a child’s Most Valuable Player

Time & resources need to be spent in conversations with mothers & fathers about their child, reinforcing parents’ skills in observing, discerning, & responding to their child.
Chronosystem perspective

Historical & ongoing colonial government policies have nearly destroyed Aboriginal family & community life.

Many Aboriginal parents are learning from scratch how to care for their children.

Think about the historical & ongoing significance of basing programs in schools, of government workers visiting in homes, of surveillance, or the words “intervention” “disability” & “special needs”
First priority of Aboriginal families is to hang on to their kids.

At a community level, first priority is to support families to re-build confidence & skills.

In ECE programs, to help children & sometimes staff to reconnect with culture & community

To avoid processes that inflame ongoing negative stereotypes about Aboriginal children & communities.

Formal processes of monitoring, screening & assessment, without culturally informed practitioners and without immediate benefit in the form of transparently meaningful services, are not part of the healing agenda for families and communities.
4. Early identification & intervention are valued

First Nations parents want to be accompanied & supported in their journey with their child.

They want early identification & services if their children are having developmental challenges.
Make the process inclusive & useful

• Make sure there are real benefits that will follow from monitoring, screening or assessment.

• Since it is well-known that there are few services to follow up on recommendations from screening & assessment, why would we invest in more screening & assessment instead of in developing more service capacity?

• Do no harm
Inclusive practice

Collaboration & Communication among everyone involved is important.

High praise for Aboriginal Supported Child Development consultants
“*She is our guru.*”
“*We totally count on her.*”
“*We can just call her.*”
“*We have a good relationship with her.*”
“*She always follows up with us and with parents.*”
• Work with primary caregivers to enable them to act on results
  • parents, guardians
  • other family members
  • ECE staff

• Remember the context – respectful, inclusive, culturally safe practice

• Parent advocates

• Navigator model (D. Olds) ensuring a firm handshake between parent/child & service
Reports on Indigenous Child project:  [www.ecdip.org]