

Executive Functioning Assessments in Early Childhood Screenings

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure educators and affiliated professionals engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-LInK Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful dialogue about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

Early identification of academic challenges is essential to ensure that children receive the proper intervention services to bolster their chances of long-term success. The three studies presented in Minn-LInK Brief No. 50 evaluated whether including measures of executive function(EF) in early childhood screening increased our ability to predict a child's later academic success within a diverse population of children. Results suggested that adding executive function measures to existing early childhood screening protocols added predictive value to third grade academic achievement. Executive functioning assessments likely have additional predictive power because they measure malleable skills and add more detailed information about learning readiness by systematically measuring how well children pay attention, follow instruction, flexibly shift behavior, and ignore distractions.

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. Our studies found that assessing executive functioning (EF) adds predictive value to later academic achievement when administered in addition to existing assessments. In what ways do you see EF skills translating to academic and behavioral skills in the classroom? Can you think of ways EF skills support learning in elementary school?
2. All three studies investigated how age of assessment affected the measurement of EF and prediction to later academic success. What are some considerations for deciding the best age for early childhood screening? What are the pros and cons of measuring children's skills at age three versus right before entering elementary school? Do you think there is an ideal age of assessment?
3. Given the large number of students who participate in early childhood screening each year, it is important to be mindful of how specific types of assessments may burden staff, parents, children, and teachers. What are some practical and administrative considerations for incorporating new screening measures? What are barriers for incorporating new measures into existing early childhood screening? How can we ensure screening is comprehensive without being overwhelming for any one involved?

For example, study three tested whether parent report measures of EF work as well as task based measures. Based on study results do you think parent report measures would be useful in measuring EF, and why or why not? Are there specific contexts that you think parent-reports versus task-based measures would be helpful?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. Recently, there has been a lot of discussion in the media and in educational policy about equitable testing practices in diverse populations of children. One motivation behind the presented research was to develop tools to equitably assess school readiness and children's needs for support. How can we advocate for assuring equitable testing practices for children of all backgrounds?
2. Access to early childhood screening is an essential component to early identification of developmental delays and need for intervention for many children. The earlier delays are identified, the earlier children can receive additional supports and services that increase their likelihood of long term success. What policies are in place in your district that support early childhood screening efforts? Where and how could you advocate for easier access for families to services and early childhood supports? What policy changes might be needed to better serve children in this context?