



Indigenous Child Project

Policy Brief

Protocols for Developmental Monitoring, Screening and Assessment of Aboriginal Young Children

Why do Aboriginal perspectives matter?

Many Aboriginal parents and practitioners have expressed the view that tools and approaches to support non-Aboriginal children and families are not culturally appropriate or the most helpful for Aboriginal children (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The very concept of “testing” and scoring or comparing the developmental levels of children, as often done in developmental assessment, is offensive to many Aboriginal parents (Stairs & Bernhard (2002). Assessment may be viewed as discordant with cultural values that affirm the ‘gifts’ of each child, acceptance of children’s differences, or the wisdom of waiting until children are older before making categorical attributions about them.

Aboriginal leaders and agencies across Canada have argued that culturally inappropriate assessment and intervention practices, as well as lack of services, frequently result in serious negative consequences for Aboriginal children (Assembly of First Nations, 1988; B.C. Aboriginal Network for Disabilities Society 1996; Canadian Centre for Justice 2001). Problems include:

- over- and under-recognition of children with developmental challenges;
- interpretations focusing on challenges in the child rather than in the environment;
- services directed at a misinterpretation of the primary problem;
- services introduced too late;
- undermining Indigenous language and cultural goals for development through an over-valuing the dominant culture (European-heritage) and language (English);
- cultural alienation;
- high rates of placement in non-Aboriginal foster care.

The Indigenous Child Project

To gain a deeper understanding of the range of views among Aboriginal people regarding formalized observation, screening and assessment, a research project was conducted from 2003 to 2007. Four community groups took part: Lil'wat Nation; Sliammon First Nation; Laichwiltach Family Life Society; and Kermode Friendship Centre. These communities were partnered with Jessica Ball and an Indigenous research team based at the University of Victoria. The project was part of a larger study of child development called the CHILD project (Child Health, Intervention, Learning and Development) funded by the federal government (Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada). The project involved community forums, and interviews and questionnaires with parents of young children, Elders, and staff in early childhood programs.

Reports of experiences in the communities with informal and formal developmental monitoring, screening and assessment were gathered, describing what approaches had been used, what helped, and what didn't. Some project participants called for an approach customized for Aboriginal children: they were asked for ideas about the content or structure of an Aboriginal-specific tool or method. The project recorded concerns about privacy, confidentiality, social exclusion, and raised questions about the potential for assessment to focus excessively on school readiness. They were concerned that surveillance or assessment using standardized tools could marginalize the goal of many of their early childhood programs to develop children and parents' knowledge of Indigenous language, spirituality, arts, and skills for living on the land.

Key findings

Most participants did not distinguish the varying purposes of monitoring, screening or assessment methods. While these distinctions could be a focus of in-service and parenting workshops, the main message was the concern that parents and practitioners expressed about whether any externally designed, formalized observation and evaluation systems are compatible with their goals of parent-support and cultural revitalization through community-based programs. This became the overriding question framed by the community partners.

Parents as children's 'Most Valuable Players'

The family-centred approach used in most Aboriginal community-based programs takes into account what will best support parents' development, as individuals, as caregivers, and as a family system, as well as children's development. A priority for investment of professionals' time and resources is to engage in conversations with primary caregivers (whether that is a father, mother, grand-parent, auntie...), hearing their perspectives and reinforcing their skills in observing, discerning, and supporting their child's development.

For better or for worse

Many stories were heard in the research project can deepen understandings.

- Stories in every community told about how formal tools had worked well to identify the source of a problem that had been mystifying a parent, or to establish a child's eligibility for a therapy program that a parent saw as desperately needed.

- Stories in every community told about how formal tools had been mis-used - for example, as ‘ammunition against the parent to prove that their child has a delay’ - or taken out of context - for example, where a child’s home language is not English and they are seen as having a language delay based on an English vocabulary test.

Diversity among communities. The community partners in the project differed in their experiences and views, and were surprised to find that the distinctions were not between on-reserve compared to off-reserve communities.

One land-based (on reserve) First Nation and one town-based (off reserve) community organization had much to say about the pro’s and con’s of formalized systems for monitoring children’s development. These communities had already been using both informal and formal tools, involving parents’ perceptions or relying on professional judgments. Practitioners in these two communities were somewhat positive about possible benefits of using formal monitoring tools, as long as they were adapted to specific cultural goals. They favoured the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, stating that it was easy to involve parents, compared to approaches that were too time consuming and were not readily amenable to bringing parents’ perspectives into focus (e.g., Work Sampling System). Practitioners in these communities reflected that they are quite far along in realizing their own visions for supporting children in their communities through well-established programs guided by cultural values and involving Elders. In contrast to the view of practitioners, parents in these communities were generally quite skeptical. A frequent theme in interviews with parents was a negative sense of government surveillance and attendant worries about having children apprehended or being required to take children to specialists, regardless of whether they understood or agreed with the purpose.

In the two other partnering communities - one land-based First Nations and one town-based community organization – many doubts were expressed about possible benefits of using formal monitoring tools. They had little experience with them, and were unsure about whether adopting ‘outside, formal’ tools would fit with the strongly cultural focus or family-centred approach in their programs. In fact, few parents in these communities agreed to participate in the project: those who did participate had little exposure or receptivity to formal developmental monitoring. Practitioners in these communities reflected that parents were just beginning to develop trusting relationships with program staff and to feel confident that they would be treated with respect and as ‘knowers’ in regards to their own children. Staff explained that their first priority was to strengthen parents’ confidence and skills: it was too soon to introduce a standardized tool. These practitioners were also emphatic about their own capacities to identify children who need extra supports or referrals, without introducing a formal tool or creating new dependencies on specialists from outside the community.

➤ **Community-based decision-making.**

Decisions about whether and when to introduce formal developmental monitoring systems must be community-based: these tools must be seen as furthering internally-identified goals for child and family development.

➤ **Community-paced introduction of formal monitoring tools.**

Introduction of formal systems to monitor, screen and assess children must be community-paced, building upon a foundation of programs in which both practitioners and parents feel that their role is valued and they have established mutual trust.

It's not only what is asked about a child's development, but how it's asked and what is done with the answers.

Data collection yielded a litany of disappointments in the communities with having prescribed developmental monitoring systems imposed upon them by funders or carried out by mostly non-Aboriginal teachers using non-Aboriginal tools at school entry, and the ways that screening and assessment had been done by visiting specialists. Their commentaries and questionnaires suggested parent involvement as the key principle from which other practice guidelines follow:

- ✓ Obtain informed consent
- ✓ Ask for parents' input
- ✓ Explain results
- ✓ Encourage questions / answer questions
- ✓ Give plain language reports for parents to keep
- ✓ Provide guidance on how to address a developmental difficulty

No services? No point in screening or assessment!

All of the communities noted that referrals for services often set parents up with a false expectation that services will be delivered to their child, when in fact long wait lists and geographic inaccessibility of services can mean that there is no follow-up. Participants also noted that some services, such as speech-language therapy, are not covered or accessible to registered Indian children living on reserves.

- Developmental screening and assessment must be tied to timely provision of early intervention services as needed.

Ethics from a social justice perspective

Stories in all four communities voiced dismay about media reports of health or development surveys negatively comparing Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal children in the same region or community, without historical or political analyses that could help to explain the results/ Participants expressed concern that these unhelpful uses of developmental monitoring tools add to negative stereotypes held by the general public about Aboriginal children and families in Canada.

- Reducing the social exclusion and negative stigma experienced by many Aboriginal children and families calls for special considerations in disseminating information obtained from research or surveys about children's health, education, and development. Publication and reporting should be guided by ethical principles articulated by national, regional or community-level Aboriginal authorities, and informed by consultations with groups implicated in reports.

Mistaken identities: developmental monitoring versus program evaluation

Reflecting on the current demand for 'evidence' of program effectiveness in order to sustain funding, some program managers cited examples of developmental monitoring tools being mistaken for program evaluation tools. This was seen as a deterrent to promoting developmental monitoring systems in their communities.

Promising, culturally-fitting practices

Practitioners noted that, just as decisions about a child should not be based on a single source of information, neither should the effectiveness of a program or the adequacy of community provisions for children be based on a single outcome measure. In group forums and interviews, a recurrent and central organizing theme was the need for policies, programs, and practices to support children within the context of their families and cultures as they rebuild after centuries of deleterious government policies. Parents and practitioners want early intervention services for their children when it is needed, but are not convinced that the content or processes of formal monitoring, screening or assessment are timely or congruent with their priorities for family and community development.

A socio-historical perspective

The chronological perspective raised by most participants in this project brought to mind Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of the 'chronosystem.' The difficult histories of Aboriginal children, families and communities call for caution and respectful dialogue to ensure decisions that are community-based, community-paced, and community-fitting – decisions that will change as environments for Aboriginal children's development change over time.

References

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