

## Early Childhood Screenings

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Kindergarten screening is mandated in some states, but it varies considerably from school to school. Screenings that occur at school entry take place the spring before Kindergarten in some areas, in the fall of the Kindergarten year in others and at the beginning of first grade for children who do not attend Kindergarten. Screenings also are available at parents request during preschool years. Screening is an interesting experience for many children and their parents, a chore for others, and a trial for a few children and their parents.

There may be some anxiety on the part of parents and children connected with screenings. Schools work hard to allay those worries. It helps sometimes if parents hear the stories that school staff collect about screenings and if parents understand that school staff are well aware of parent concerns about the process.

A favorite story to share about Kindergarten screening involves an adorable little girl who was brought to the Early Childhood Coordinator by the Kindergarten teacher who was conducting part of the screening. The teacher was obviously concerned as could be seen from the expression on her face. The teacher reported that the child had not answered a single question. In fact she had not spoken at all. A special needs teacher overheard the conversation and volunteered to try to assess the child.

Sometime later the special needs teacher and the child came bouncing happily down the hall. The child carried a huge stuffed bear. When asked how the screening went, the special needs teacher said very seriously that the child had not spoken a word, but the bear had answered all of the questions perfectly! The clever teacher had introduced the bear and asked all of her questions to the bear. The child happily complied playing the role of the bear answering the questions in her best 'bear' voice.

Screening tests were originally used at the beginning of Grade 1 to identify children who might have difficulty learning to read. Today, there are two types of screening tests in use, developmental screening tools and readiness measures. Developmental screening measures are given in order to predict whether or not a child will be successful in school or will have difficulty. They are designed to identify children who should receive further assessment in order to determine if they may have special needs. Readiness tools measure skills that children have already acquired and are of some use in curricula planning.

Parents often ask whether or not their child is ready for kindergarten. What does it mean if a child performs poorly on one of these tools? Often it doesn't mean much at all. It is not unusually for children to have a problem for reasons that have little to do with ability to learn or to a lack of skills.

At one screening session in an elementary school there were two children who did poorly on the motor parts of a screening. When the results were shared with their parents, it was learned that the boy, who had had difficulty, had fallen out of a tree earlier in the morning and was not eager to try any motor tasks. The girl who had not performed well chose not to participate because she did not want to get her new dress mussed. Neither child had a motor weakness.

The question about what performance on screening tests mean is actually difficult to answer when parents ask because there are so many factors that influence success in a school program that the screening doesn't predict; such as attendance, a child's experiential background, how the child feels about learning, the method of instruction and the skill of the school staff in meeting diverse needs of children.

In fact, the error rate of screening tools is higher than most people realize. An analysis of screening tools by researchers have proven that the tools don't predict subsequent success or failure well at all.

There has been a fair amount of criticism about using screening tests and many experts suggest that they not be used at all. Even when schools choose to use them, they should not be used to make important decisions about children such as delaying school entry or placing children in special programs. The only appropriate use of the screening tools is to use them to determine which children need referral for further evaluation.

Appropriate screening practices involve identifying children who will need something different than other children such as special reinforcement, extra practice, or a specific therapy such as speech or fine motor therapies. The tools can also be used to determine which children will need ongoing monitoring as they enter school.

When your child participates in kindergarten screening be sure to provide information about your child that will help school staff interpret your child's performance on screening measures. Be sure to ask the questions that you want to ask and should you feel that your child has not been comfortable during screening, let the school staff know that this was not a typical day for your child.

If you are surprised when you learn of the results of screening and feel that the results do not reflect your child's typical behavior, ask for a second screening or discuss other ways of gathering information. Screening tests should never be used to deny school entry, to recommend kindergarten retention or to recommend second year programs. The only valid decision as a result of a screening test is to refer a child for further evaluation. It is important to understand that a brief look at a child is not the same as ongoing monitoring or as an evaluation.

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