

# Introduction

## A. What Is a Comprehensive Assessment System?

A comprehensive assessment system is a coordinated and integrated system of assessments. The system helps organize information about how and when children are developing and learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). It helps leaders make informed staff- and program-level decisions. A comprehensive assessment system includes [developmental screening](#) as well as ongoing child assessment and learning environment quality assessment, including staff and family observations, observations of home visitors, and family engagement information. A comprehensive system dictates how staff conduct assessments, how to organize and interpret assessment data, resources that share assessment results with families and other stakeholders, and [outcomes](#) or standards that staff assess (Atkins-Burnett et al., 2014). In Head Start, the staff assess outcomes or standards that are aligned with the goals in the Early Learning Outcomes Framework.

## B. What Is Ongoing Child Assessment?

Ongoing child assessment involves planning, collecting and documenting, interpreting, and using and sharing data about children's development and learning over time (National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, 2014). Ongoing assessment starts when children enroll in a program, and it continues throughout their participation. It helps education staff and families learn about children's unique interests, strengths, and needs. Staff use this information to teach and individualize learning opportunities.

Ongoing child assessment differs from developmental screening, but data from both help to inform a better understanding of children's developmental status and progress. Developmental screening is one or more brief checks on a child's developmental status. Screening is used to help determine whether children might need additional evaluation. Ongoing child assessment involves gathering information repeatedly and over time and using that information to plan for learning experiences and to individualize interactions with children. When ongoing assessment data indicate that a child is not making expected progress, staff may refer the child for additional evaluation, even if the child passed the initial screening.

Regardless of whether staff use [observation-based](#) or [direct assessments](#), all staff conducting ongoing child assessment need training and support so the information collected is accurate and useable.

- **Observation-based:** Collect and document information when observing and interacting with children during everyday learning opportunities and routines. Some observation-based assessments include Teaching Strategies Gold (Heroman et al., 2010), Galileo Pre-K (Assessment Technology Incorporated, 2018), the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) 2015 (California Department of Education, 2016), and the Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP; Parks, 1995).
- **Direct:** Give children structured tasks or activities. The tasks come with specific administration instructions. Use checklists or scoring rubrics to document children's responses to the task. Direct assessments can include [standardized](#), [norm-referenced assessment instruments](#), [rating scales](#), and [general outcome measurement](#).

### Throughout This Guide

- The term *teachers* includes center-based teachers and teacher assistants, as well as family childcare providers.
- The term *education staff* includes teachers, assistant teachers, family childcare providers, and home visitors.
- The term *teaching teams* includes all education staff who spend time interacting with children.

The Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) 1302.33 outline assessment for individualization requirements for all children. The HSPPS state that a program must "conduct standardized and structured assessments, which may be observation-based or direct," in a way that provides usable information and is frequent enough to support individualization throughout the year. Assessments must be "age, developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and appropriate for children with disabilities, as needed" (1302.33(b)(1), (c)(1)). In addition, staff should use information from these assessments with informal observations and information from family and other professionals to determine a child's needs and adjust strategies to individualize teaching practices or home visiting strategies.

## **HSPPS 1302.33 Child screenings and assessments.**

(b) Assessment for individualization.

(1) A program must conduct standardized and structured assessments, which may be observation-based or direct, for each child that provide ongoing information to evaluate the child's development level and progress in outcomes aligned to the goals described in the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five*. Such assessments must result in usable information for teachers, home visitors, and parents and be conducted with sufficient frequency to allow for individualization within the program year.

(2) A program must regularly use information from paragraph (b)(1) of this section along with informal teacher observations and additional information from family and staff, as relevant, to determine a child's strengths and needs, inform and adjust strategies to better support individualized learning and improve teaching practices in center-based and family child care settings, and improve home visit strategies in home-based models. See [Appendix F](#) for full HSPPS citation.

## **HSPPS 1302.102(c) Using data for continuous improvement.**

(1) A program must implement a process for using data to identify program strengths and needs, develop and implement plans that address program needs, and continually evaluate compliance with program performance standards and progress towards achieving program goals described in paragraph (a) of this section.

(2) This process must:

(i) Ensure data is aggregated, analyzed and compared in such a way to assist agencies in identifying risks and informing strategies for continuous improvement in all program service areas;

(ii) Ensure child-level assessment data is aggregated and analyzed at least three times a year, including for sub-groups, such as dual language learners and children with disabilities, as appropriate, except in programs operating fewer than 90 days, and used with other program data described in paragraph (c)(2)(iv) of this section to direct continuous improvement related to curriculum choice and implementation, teaching practices, professional development, program design and other program decisions, including changing or targeting scope of services; and,

(iii) For programs operating fewer than 90 days, ensures child assessment data is aggregated and analyzed at least twice during the program operating period, including for subgroups, such as dual language learners and children with disabilities, as appropriate, and used with other program data described in paragraph (c)(2)(iv) of this section to direct continuous improvement related to curriculum choice and implementation, teaching practices, professional development, program design and other program decisions, including changing or targeting scope of services;

(iv) Use information from ongoing monitoring and the annual self-assessment, and program data on teaching practice, staffing and professional development, child-level assessments, family needs assessments, and comprehensive services, to identify program needs, and develop and implement plans for program improvement; and,

(v) Use program improvement plans as needed to either strengthen or adjust content and strategies for professional development, change program scope and services, refine school readiness and other program goals, and adapt strategies to better address the needs of sub-groups.

## C. Why Is Ongoing Child Assessment Important?

Ongoing assessment is essential to understanding children’s progress in the key areas of development outlined in the ELOF or state [early learning and development foundations or standards](#) (ELDF, ELDS). Information that staff gather during ongoing assessment helps them adjust their curriculum, learning opportunities, interactions, and instruction to support and individualize for all children.

Ongoing assessment data also helps you make informed decisions about professional development and curriculum.

- The quality of the assessment data can help you understand where your staff need additional training or support when assessing and using assessment tools.
- Trends in ongoing assessment data can help you understand where children have successes or needs. It may help to target training for staff, so they are better prepared to support children.
- Trends in children’s development and learning may encourage you to explore your curriculum—its scope and sequence; how it addresses cultural, linguistic, and ability diversity; and whether staff implement it with [fidelity](#).

### Resource Highlight

For more information on curriculum fidelity, see [Curriculum Fidelity Resources](#).

Ongoing assessment in a Head Start program is part of a comprehensive assessment system and a coordinated approach to support all children. When staff take time to prepare and implement ongoing child assessment, programs can better meet children’s collective and individual needs.

## D. Does Ongoing Child Assessment Relate to Aggregating and Analyzing Data Three Times a Year?

The HSPPS require programs aggregate and analyze child data at least three times a year (1302.102(c)(2)), except in programs operating fewer than 90 days.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this process, programs examine data on subgroups, including children who are DLLs or children with disabilities, as part of this process. Aggregating and analyzing data is a type of interim assessment because programs do it a few times a year (Riley-Ayers, 2014). This supports direct, continuous program improvement related to “curriculum choice and implementation, teaching practices, professional development, program design and other program decisions, including changing or targeting scope of services” (1302.102(c)(2)).

Programs may aggregate information from ongoing child assessments and use it with other data points to evaluate children’s progress toward early learning outcomes and your program’s progress toward school readiness goals. Because the amount of information aggregated across all Head Start children in a program can be daunting, programs often present interim assessment information as summary numerical scores or percentages.

<sup>1</sup> “For programs operating fewer than 90 days, child assessment data is aggregated and analyzed at least twice during the program operating period, including for subgroups, such as dual language learners and children with disabilities” (1302.102(c)(2)).





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