

## Voices from the Field: Karen Nemeth



### Q1: Why is it important for practitioners to use assessment materials and strategies that are appropriate for the child's age and level of development and accommodate the child's sensory, physical, communication, cultural, linguistic, social, and emotional characteristics?

Children can only show you what they know and can do if they understand what you are asking them. The purpose of assessment in early childhood education is to learn about EACH child's interests, strengths, and needs. To make this possible, three points must be addressed.

- First – Children need to understand the questions or requests in the assessment in order to know how to respond.
- Second – Children need to have the verbal or nonverbal language needed to demonstrate their skills, knowledge, and interests in ways that the practitioner can record.
- Third – Children need to feel comfortable in the assessment process in order to stay engaged and to respond fully and confidently.

Even when an age-appropriate assessment is chosen, it may not work for a particular child due to variations in cognitive and linguistic development, so adaptations will be needed. A child may have a sensory disability or sensitivity, or a physical disability impacting coordination or articulation that can influence how he processes and responds to the demands of the assessment.

There may be many reasons why a young child might not respond to a question even though they know the answer. A child's communication with a practitioner during an assessment may be affected by their communication style and temperament, the child's experiences in relating to adults, their temporary emotional state, or their learned cultural expectations for adult-child interactions.

Assessment is a process, and this is most clearly true for young children. Each step in the process can reveal some information about the child's level of development and sensory, physical, communication, cultural, linguistic, social, and emotional characteristics that will make subsequent steps more appropriate for each child and more effective in meeting assessment goals.

### Q2: How should practitioners plan to assess young children who are dual language learners?

Research shows that young children who are growing up with two languages have two separate language systems in their brains. This means that what they have learned in one language will be stored in that language and may not be accessible when they are communicating in the other language. So, even though a child may appear to communicate well in English, some of the things

they know will still be understood or expressed in their home language. For this reason, assessment is never really accurate unless it is conducted in both of the child's languages. For example, a child may know some color names in English and some color names in Korean. If the assessment is conducted only in English, the child will only be able to give a partial response. This incomplete information will then be used to adapt curriculum, plan learning goals for the child and may influence the practitioner's beliefs and expectations for that child.

Even though we often use the term "dominant language" to help practitioners identify the more frequently used language as the choice for the primary assessment, this will not result in a complete description of the child's strengths, needs, and interests. Assessment for young children should not be based on one score. It should always be a collection of information gathered in a variety of ways – called multiple measures. I like to say assessment is a folder, not a test. If your purchased assessment has not been validated on populations that speak the language of the child, the score for a translated version or use of an interpreter will not be valid. That doesn't mean these strategies are useless. It only means that the score is not accurate. The prompts, observations, conversations and interactions with appropriate materials using the assessment can all be recorded as anecdotal notes to build your understanding of where a child is starting and where they need to go. Classroom observations and interviews with families will provide additional insights.

Children are likely to have more sophisticated skills and vocabulary in their areas of interest. By observing the play and book choices they make at school, and by interviewing their parents about their behavior at home, you can gain additional information you can use to engage each child in activities and conversations that reveal their true strengths and needs in whatever language works best for that child in that context.