

Head Start Program Performance Standards Education: Screening and Assessment

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Sharon Yandian: Thank you for joining us to learn more about the new education requirements.

Amanda Bryans: And I'm Amanda Bryans. Today we're gonna focus on the screening and assessment requirements from the new Head Start Program Performance Standards. And I think we should jump right in. Sharon, first let's start by talking about what screenings are and why we do them. What's the purpose of screenings?

Sharon: That's a good question. Happy to answer that. Screenings are conducted on all children with the purpose of identifying children who may need further evaluation, whether it's hearing or vision or developmental concerns. It's not to provide a diagnosis. It's really, people call it a, you know, it's supposed to be easy to use, quick, a quick way to be able to get some information about a child in order to consider whether they need a referral or not.

Amanda: That's right. I think that historically sometimes people have been confused about screening.

Sharon: Just a little bit.

Amanda: So it's really important to have that purpose very clearly described. The requirements are clear about the time table as well for ensuring that children are screened. Head Start programs must conduct those screenings for development, children's behavior, motor, language, social and emotional, cognitive status within 45 calendar days of the child starting the program. And for programs that operate 90 days or less, we might need to actually do that sooner. So those programs must do it within 30 days.

Sharon: And people should, those should sound familiar.

Amanda: Yeah.

Sharon: From our prior regulations.

Amanda: Yeah, that's not a change.

Sharon: No. The requirements also specify that screening and assessment tools must be standardized, research based, valid, and reliable. Can you let the folks know what does it mean to, for a tool to be standardized?

Amanda: Yeah, I think that's caused some confusion. We've heard a little bit of some questions about that means. So standardized is not very complicated. It just means there are directions for administering the screening, to ensure that it's used consistently, and that children are screened, you know, using the same set of items and that the people administering it do it in the same way, and in that way you can depend on the results to accurately identify children's status, and whether they need additional evaluation. We also always really want to help make sure programs know that you always should take information, other available information, with regards to the child. We know there have been times where a child simply didn't speak during the whole screening, and you could be quite worried about such a child. They might look like they really did poorly, and then the parents says, oh my goodness, she's such a chatterbox at home. For that child we might say, well, let's spend a few days getting to know the child and then re-administer the screening.

Sharon: That's a very important point, Amanda, and parents, as we know, are the primary educators, and leaving out consultation with them just leaves an incomplete picture of the child. So that's great. The other thing I think we wanted to mention is that people have asked about the research base around the tools, and so research based means that the tool was developed based on research about how children develop and learn.

Amanda: And then finally, valid and reliable, and this is also a question that's come up, and is really important. Valid means you're measuring what you think you're measuring, and there are many examples of people, of instruments not measuring what they were purported to measure. For

example, if you're saying that you're measuring a child's vocabulary, but they have to read the question and answer in order to identify the correct answer, that may not really be measuring vocabulary. It's measuring whether the child can read.

Sharon: Mmm-hmm.

Amanda: So you wanna really make sure you know that each, the items in the instrument have been shown to measure what they're supposed to measure. And reliable means, again, that you can depend on them. So, Sharon, if you've been trained to do the screening, and I've also been trained, we're gonna get the same result for that child, or if the child takes the screening today, or tomorrow, the results are gonna be very similar. Maybe not exactly the same, but within the range of the same.

Sharon: So we can answer, we can ask and answer the same questions about assessment tools, which have similar requirements. So, Amanda, what is assessment, and why do we use it?

Amanda: Well assessment, the purposes of assessment are actually multiple. Importantly assessment is a process that we use to understand a child's status, and how they're developing and progressing over time. We want assessment to be aligned or inclusive of all the domains of the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, so that we know, you know, how children are doing in each of those required domains, and we want to be able to make informed decisions about each child's needs. So I think that's really important. Another question that we've had a lot is kind of, well, you've got all this, you know, new, newly specific language about the criteria for assessment. Does that mean we can't do observation based assessment? Are you saying we have to only direct assessment? And the answer's no. There are many observation based assessment instruments that you can use to, that will meet these criteria, and it's important because it means kind of the difference between just a running narrative of everything a child does, and being able to organize that information around domains, and around the child's progress to understand kind of really what the child's status is and how effective your instruction is, and again, how you should be individualizing for that child.

Sharon: Right. That's great that you mentioned it. I know that was often times confusing in the past. So the requirements are pretty clear. It states that it can be direct assessment or observation based.

Amanda: Right, right.

Sharon: And that's what folks will, will see. So, and just like with a screening tool, standardized and structured simply means that there are instructions for how the assessment is administered and scored, and that, for example, the same materials are used in a direct assessment or the same criteria are used for rating observations across all the children, as you were describing. I think the other thing of course is the assessment results along with input from a mental health professional, and the consent of parents, may be used if there's an indication that a child would need to be referred for an evaluation through IDEA.

Amanda: Yeah, that's right Sharon. And sometimes we see a child who maybe passes the screening, but they kind of plateau in the assessment, and a teacher becomes concerned, and that, that becomes a reason, along with input from the parent to refer, refer the child. So Sharon, before we move on, could you talk a little bit more specifically about some of the opportunities and considerations we have for screening and assessment with children who are dual language learners?

Sharon: Of course you know that's, that's one of my favorite topics.

Amanda: I felt like it would be, that's why I asked, you know.

Sharon: Yeah, I know, what can I say? I mean we really, we have a whole video on services to children who are dual language learners, so I'll try to be kind of brief as we talk about the goals of assessment for children who are dual language learners. We want to learn about how children are progressing in their English language and across all the domains of the Early Learning Outcomes Framework, regardless of the language they speak, and so those are the kind of two areas to clarify. It's what want to know how they're progressing in English, and we want to learn how they're progressing. And, so, we know that there are very few tools that are considered valid and reliable, as you described earlier, for children who speak languages other than English, and so in this case, it's even more important that

that assessment information be gathered, as we talked about, from a number of sources. What the standards have done in terms of requirements for programs is if the program has a teacher who speaks that language of the child, then, and there is an assessment tool, then they should go ahead and do that assessment. They would do the assessment in the home language, and in English. There are many cases where we have a teacher who doesn't speak the language, and so in that case, an interpreter would be appropriate, and so we have some guidance on how that, what that looks like. We also know that there are cases where we have languages where we don't have a tool, and we don't have a speaker, and in this case, you know, what we've said is if you have nothing else, then of course you should use a tool in English, but there should be lots of caution, and there really should be lots of other information that the program is thinking about and looking at to try to get a complete picture of the child.

Amanda: Well thank you Sharon for that excellent summary related to serving children who are dual language learners in terms of screening and assessment. Before we conclude today, I really want to encourage anyone who hasn't already done so to go back to the ECLKC and watch the first video we did that provided an overview of the education Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Sharon: Yeah, thanks so much for joining us today.

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