



# The Words We Use

## A Glossary of Terms for Early Childhood Education Standards and Assessments

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**T**he Early Childhood Education Assessment Consortium (ECEA) online glossary had its roots in the 2002 NAEYC Professional Development Leadership Institute. Participants gathered to discuss the draft joint position statement on standards being developed by NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). (See [www.naeyc.org/resources/position\\_statements/creating\\_conditions.asp](http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position_statements/creating_conditions.asp).) Several participants noted that even the simplest words related to standards and assessments for young children are burdened with unclear meanings or different meanings, depending on who is considering them.

An informal group of enthusiastic “lexicographers” agreed to take on

the ambitious task of developing a glossary of key words related to standards and assessment for young children. They hoped to provide clarity for the field by creating a consensus listing of the most essential and relevant words and then linking the definitions of these words to resources for delving deeper into their meanings.

Over the next several months, the dictionary developers winnowed down the list of terms to be defined, divided the labor, and fine-tuned a framework for the task. The focus would be on early learning standards and assessments with a broad view of development. They expected that the resulting glossary would be dynamic, timely, and easily changed or updated, and therefore best suited to a Web-based format.

Throughout their deliberations, the lexicographers pursued and scrutinized well-researched definitions. The resulting lexicon, “The Words We Use: A Glossary of Terms for Early Childhood Educa-

tion Standards and Assessments,” became a reality. It defines 31 primary terms. Each primary word is followed by a group of important related terms that enlarge its meaning and provide a scaffold of additional information. In many cases the related terms are also defined and linked.

Web and print links tie each primary term to other academic and research-based definitions. These delineate the seminal sources from which the meaning was derived and allow the reader to explore the term in greater depth and compare the analysis in the glossary with those of other experts.

The lexicographers decided that the glossary would not contain test measurement and statistical terms that have widely accepted meanings, such as *valid*, *reliable*, *norm*, and *standard score*. Likewise the glossary does not provide information on specific test instruments. However, comprehensive sources for this information are provided

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within the introduction, and the Web sites noted earlier will take the user to more technical information.

The glossary is designed as an online resource. The Web format permits it to be expanded to include additional words that would benefit from definitions specific to use with young children, and it allows for changes in meaning that may occur over time. Readers can expect to find new words added to the glossary on a regular basis and can suggest additional words online.

The lion's share of credit for development of the glossary goes to Harriet Egertson, early childhood specialist for the Nebraska Department of Education at the beginning of the project. Later, as an independent consultant, she provided leadership, coordination, expertise, and guidance, in addition to writing many of the definitions. Particular thanks are also owed to Susan Andersen, early childhood consultant in the Iowa Department of Education. Her energy as coordinator of the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) Early Childhood Education Assessment State Collaborative on Assessment (ECEA-SCASS) helped initiate the effort. Appreciation goes to Dianne Rothenberg, codirector of the Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative Information Technology Group; her energy and passion for words and their meanings contributed to the framework for the endeavor. The other members of the Lexicon team (p. 44) contributed significantly to early drafts and throughout the review process.

For additional information about ECEA-SCASS, see [www.ccsso.org/projects/SCASS/Projects/Early\\_Childhood\\_Education\\_Assessment\\_Consortium/](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/SCASS/Projects/Early_Childhood_Education_Assessment_Consortium/) or contact Jana Martella, CCSSO's director of early childhood and family education, at [janam@ccsso.org](mailto:janam@ccsso.org).

## Glossary of Terms

**accommodations:** Adaptations in assessment tools and standards to permit children with disabilities or English-language learners to show what they know and can do. Adjustments may be made, for example, in the way a test is administered or presented, in the timing, in the language, or in how the child responds. The nature of the adjustment determines whether or not what is being measured or the comparability of scores is affected.

**accountability:** An organization's or individual's responsibility for developing and implementing a process or procedure to justify decisions made and to demonstrate the results or outcomes produced (e.g., what progress children are making).

**achievement test:** A testing instrument, typically standardized and norm referenced, used to measure how much a child has learned in relation to educational objectives.

**alternative assessment:** The terms *alternate assessment* and *alternative assessment* are also used to describe accommodations made to enable children with disabilities to participate in the assessment process. See *performance-based assessment* and *accommodation*.

**aptitude test:** A testing instrument intended to predict a child's ability to do or learn something, given an opportunity to learn.

**assessment:** A systematic procedure for obtaining information from observation, interviews, portfolios, projects, tests, and other sources that can be used to make judgments about characteristics of children or programs.

**authentic assessment:** See *performance-based assessment*.

**benchmarks (performance standards):** Clear, specific descriptions of knowledge or skill that can be supported through observations, descriptions and documentations of a child's performance or behavior and by samples of the child's work; often used as points of reference in connection with more broadly stated content standards.

**content standards:** Statements that provide a clear description of what a child should know and be able to do in a content area at a particular level.

**criterion-referenced test:** A testing instrument in which the test taker's performance (i.e., score) is interpreted by comparing it with a prespecified standard or specific content and/or skills.

**developmental assessment:** An ongoing process of observing a child's current competencies (including knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes) and using the information to help the child develop further in the context of family and caregiving and learning environments.

**documentation:** Documentation is the process of keeping track of and preserving children's work as evidence of their progress or of a program's development.

**early learning standards:** Statements that describe expectations for the learning and development of young children across the domains of health and physical well-being; social and emotional well-being; approaches to learning; language development and symbol systems; and general knowledge about the world around them.

**evaluation:** The measurement, comparison, and judgment of the value, quality, or worth of children's work and/or of their schools, teachers, or a specific educational program, based upon valid evidence gathered through assessment.

**formal assessment:** A procedure for obtaining information that can be used to make judgments about characteristics of children or programs using standardized instruments.

**indicators:** Various statistical values, data, or other reported information that, when aggregated, provides an indication of the condition or direction of movement relative to a standard or issue under study.

**informal assessment:** A procedure for obtaining information that can be used to make judgments about characteristics of children or programs using means other than standardized instruments.

## Glossary of Terms (continued)

**norm-referenced test:** A standardized testing instrument by which the test taker's performance is interpreted in relation to the performance of a group of peers who have previously taken the same test. The group of peers is known as the norming group.

**observational assessment:** A process in which the teacher systematically observes and records information about the child's level of development and/or knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to make a determination about what has been learned, improve teaching, and support children's progress. A checklist or notes are often used to record what has been observed.

**outcomes:** Changes in behavior, knowledge, understanding, ability, skills, and/or attitudes that occur as a result of participation in a program or course of study, receiving services, or using a product.

**performance standards:** See *benchmarks*.

**performance-based (alternate, alternative, authentic) assessment:** Any assessment strategy designed to estimate a child's knowledge, understanding, ability, skill, and/or attitudes in a consistent fashion across individuals emphasizing methods other than standardized achievement tests, particularly those using multiple choice formats. Performance-based assessments typically include exhibitions, investigations, demonstrations, written or oral responses, journals, and portfolios.

**portfolio assessment:** A collection of work, usually drawn from children's classroom work, which, when subjected to objective analysis, becomes an assessment tool. This occurs when (1) the assessment purpose is defined; (2) criteria or methods are made clear for determining what is put into the portfolio, by whom, and when; and (3) criteria for assessing either the collection or individual pieces of work are identified and used to make judgments about children's learning.

**program standards:** Widely accepted expectations for the characteristics or

quality of early childhood settings in homes, centers, and schools. Such characteristics typically include the ratio of adults to children; the qualifications and stability of the staff; characteristics of adult-child relationships; the program philosophy and curriculum model; the nature of relationships with families; the quality and quantity of equipment and materials; the quality and quantity of space per child; and safety and health provisions.

**readiness test:** A testing instrument designed to measure skills believed to be related to school learning tasks and to be predictive of school success.

**rubrics:** Descriptive scales for organizing and interpreting data gathered from observations of children's performance on a learning task and/or of children's developmental status. Rubrics describe levels of performance of children's work or a particular area of knowledge by defining varying levels of quality or mastery and providing indicators of each level.

**screening:** The use of a brief procedure or instrument designed to identify, from within a large population of children, those who may need further assessment to verify developmental and/or health risks.

**standardized test:** A testing instrument that is administered, scored, and interpreted in a standard manner. It may be either norm referenced or criterion referenced.

**standards:** Widely accepted statements of expectations for children's learning or the quality of schools and other programs.

**standards-based assessment:** A process through which the criteria for assessment are derived directly from content and/or performance standards.

**test:** One or more questions, problems, and/or tasks designed to estimate a child's knowledge, understanding, ability, skill, and/or attitudes in a consistent fashion across individuals. Information from a test or tests contributes to judgments made as a part of an assessment process.

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*The Words We Use: A Glossary of  
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Standards and Assessments is online  
at [www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary](http://www.ccsso.org/eceaglossary).*