State systems for assessing children as they enter kindergarten are expanding rapidly. Ever since the nation’s governors created the National Education Goals Panel some 11 years ago, the first goal, that “By the year 2000 all children in America will start school ready to learn,” has stimulated widespread discussion and debate—but even more, it has led to action, on many fronts. It seems as though each week sees more and more states entering the assessment arena, intent on determining whether their children are “ready to learn” when they come to kindergarten. Many of us in this room are called on for advice by state administrators, school district evaluation staff, or funders. We get phone calls and e-mails with the plea: “We’re under the gun to produce some scores; what should we do? And, by the way, we have to collect data in September” (the request having come in April or May, if that early). Among all the issues of design, implementation, and instrumentation that surround state decisions about readiness (and which we are discussing at this symposium), instrumentation often includes the thorniest problems, and is often the first concern we hear about. So, what should we do, and where should we start?

I have to admit that I generally try to avoid giving concrete advice. As you will soon see, I continue that tradition in this paper. I have several reasons for taking this stance. Perhaps if I share them with you, we can, together, get a clearer picture of the very substantial challenges

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1This is a pre-conference draft of a paper being prepared for discussion at the Assessing the State of State Assessments Symposium, Renaissance Concourse Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia, December 12-14, 2001. The author is a Senior Fellow at Mathematica Policy Research in Princeton, New Jersey. For additional information call 609-275-2245 or email to jlove@mathematica-mpr.com. I am grateful to SERVE and to Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. for the support that made this paper possible.
facing those on the front lines, who really must decide on the instruments and put some assessment procedures in place by Labor Day. Before going there, however, I’d like to return to the conceptual foundations of the assessment and instrumentation dilemmas. Thus, in the first section of this paper I review what seem to me to be the most important and essential ingredients of a concept of readiness. Then, I want to consider the current educational and policy context, which differs in some important ways from the events swirling around the Goal One committee in the era that began these debates. A major difference is the contemporary emphasis on reading in the primary grades, and in this context I want to remember the “basics.”

In the third section of the paper, I address the most central dilemmas of instrumentation—what can we know about children’s readiness, and how can we choose among available instruments? Finally, I turn to a broader framework, one that I encourage us all to think about as we go about our tasks of designing, measuring, and interpreting school readiness assessments.

WHAT IS READINESS?

The Goal One Technical Planning Group broke new ground by defining not only what the important dimensions of “readiness” are but also what conditions are critical for supporting those dimensions. The five dimensions of early development and learning (physical and motor, social and emotional, approaches toward learning, language, and cognition and general knowledge) have become widely accepted, in one form or another. The three supporting conditions (having

(continued)


3While this committee of the National Goals Panel proudly—and for good reasons—described “children’s early development and learning” without use of the term, “readiness,” it is increasingly awkward to engage in constructive discussions about the issues without it. Discussing “readiness for success in school” seems to me to avoid some of the problems with traditional use of “readiness for school” or, even worse, “readiness to learn.”
access to quality preschool programs, parents as children’s first teachers, and appropriate nutrition and health care) have even been expanded upon by others in recent years.

Sam Meisels notes, as have others, that the term “readiness” describes a relationship rather than a particular quality or set of characteristics of the child. In other words, if two children have the same set of developmental skills, abilities, and attitudes, one could be considered “ready” for school and the other not, depending on the nature and expectations of the school that the child will be entering. This relativity becomes even more complex when we consider that different states, and perhaps counties and communities within states, may have different expectations. In fact, I have argued previously that the community context for readiness is a particularly important consideration.

At some point, however, principle must give way to practicality. It is important to remember this relativity; but if we dwell on it, we will never move forward. I resolve this dilemma for myself by assuming that schools, at least in some general sense, are likely to have common expectations for the children who enter their kindergartens and first grades. It would be important, however, to determine whether this assumption has any validity. I return to the interesting notion of the community context of readiness in a couple of pages.

THE CURRENT POLICY CONTEXT

With the change in administrations almost a year ago, we have seen an increasing emphasis at the federal level on reading as the central challenge of elementary schools, and preparing children to learn to read as the major goal of kindergartens and programs that precede

(continued)

kindergarten—especially the year or two immediately preceding kindergarten, which we usually call “preschool.” I embrace these emphases, but suggest here that the early childhood field has yet to fully realize their implications for prekindergarten education, the myriad programs that preschool-age children experience in this country, and the assessment of school readiness.

The Centrality of Reading

Schools have always focused on reading instruction in the early elementary years. Today, that focus appears even greater, and concerns about “pre-reading” extend the discussion to preschool and earlier. The current emphases for elementary school curricula have important implications for readiness assessment.

At the July 2001 White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development, Secretary Paige noted the possible chain of events set off by failure to learn to read: children who can’t do homework, have difficulty keeping up in other classes, are repeating grades, get misidentified as learning-disabled and shunted to special education classes, and drop out. Tommy Thompson added another dimension: “without reading skills, you can’t figure out a medical prescription, read a warning label, or keep up with news that could benefit your health.” Russ Whitehurst, Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement, emphasized the role of “pre-reading skills,” while giving us a heads-up on assessment priorities: “Given the strong predictive relationship between pre-reading skills and later reading outcomes, screening children for pre-reading knowledge should become as routine as screening for problems in hearing and vision.” To Whitehurst, pre-reading skills include “the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are precursors to children’s ability to read and write, and the environments that support those abilities.” This does not sound very far from the position of the Goal One Technical Planning Group.
The summit speakers did more than talk about the outcomes for children, however. Susan Neuman, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, emphasized the role of environmental stimulation. Similarly, Reid Lyon, NICHD’s Child Development and Behavior Branch Chief, in summarizing the conference themes, noted that “school readiness concepts are best learned when provided in safe environments where the kids feel emotionally secure and where they can develop close relationships with other children and caring adults.” He reflected the comments of others, saying that getting children ready to read is critical because of the strong “link between what preschool kids know about words, sounds, letters, and print, and later academic performance.” However, what most intrigued me about his comments—which I did not see reflected as much in the other presentations—was his placement of academic achievements in a broader context: “…providing opportunities to foster these cognitive abilities must be integrated in a seamless manner with interactions to develop social competencies and emotional health to reflect the inseparable nature of these developmental achievements” (emphasis added). I will return to these viewpoints in the final section of this paper; but first, I want to review the important considerations in defining readiness for success in school.

**Back to Basics: Or, Let’s Remember the Roots of Readiness**

Three elements are crucial to the way I think about readiness: comprehensiveness, embeddedness, and continuity. The five dimensions referred to above (and summarized in Attachment 1) make the definition comprehensive. The direct implication for states is that their assessment strategies should tap all five dimensions of children’s development and learning. This may not be as hard as it sounds. We already see examples on the federal level of large-scale studies that come very close to meeting this goal. For example, the constructs being assessed in the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) align quite nicely with the dimensions outlined by Kagan et al. (1994; see Attachment 2).
Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), as well as the birth cohort study (ECLS-B), includes measures that span the five dimensions. Interestingly, the Early Head Start national evaluation, although focusing on children younger than the preschool years, also includes measures that span the five dimensions of early development and learning and the conditions that support them.\(^5\)

Covering all the dimensions is a challenge, and none of the studies cited captures all dimensions equally well. Two main reasons are often given for this: Comprehensive assessment (1) requires extensive assessment, with potential risk of overly intruding on the time of children, parents, and teachers; and (2) means assessing areas for which the field often lacks reliable and valid measures. The areas of social-emotional development and approaches toward learning are typically the least-well measured. Nevertheless, it is a challenge that is important to meet head-on, since a partial assessment runs the risk of creating a biased—or, at best, incomplete—view of states’ and communities’ progress toward their readiness goals.

Assessment must also be designed to obtain data on the conditions supporting children’s development described in the objectives accompanying the first goal. The FACES measures include a parent interview that taps a portion of the community conditions supporting readiness; but these need to be expanded. In fact, there is good reason to believe that the conditions supporting readiness to succeed in school extend well beyond the three areas outlined by the planning group. These conditions might include such elements as (1) child and family conditions (both protective and risk factors, which include child health conditions, family income, and family life conditions); (2) community service provisions and their accessibility (including health, parenting education, child care and early education services, and the

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“readiness” of the schools); and (3) systems capacity (such as the efficacy and efficiency with which the community infrastructure functions).  

Thus, we see readiness assessments as embedded in these supporting conditions. Previously, I have argued for a community-oriented perspective to best reflect this “embeddedness.” The strength of a community-based approach to defining and assessing children’s level of preparation for success in school is that the community can ascertain—and influence—the measures of success employed by the schools. When considering statewide assessments, we come to an interesting issue of what defines the “community.” Can an entire state constitute a “community,” or must we consider smaller, more-homogeneous subdivisions?  

Child and family conditions impinge directly on each child’s development. To further illustrate what may be important for a comprehensive readiness assessment, Larry Aber, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and I suggested that assessments should include indicators of the extent to which the family is “thriving, safe, or in danger across a number of dimensions of well-being.” As with the dimensions of children’s development and learning, the supporting conditions may also be tailored to what’s important in each “community.” They may include, for example, (1) fewer families living in unsafe housing or violence-prone neighborhoods, (2) reduced incidence of

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(continued)


Although systems capacity is a very important consideration, its assessment probably is beyond the scope of most community readiness efforts.


child abuse and neglect, (3) increased parental confidence that their children have a bright future, (4) increased involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, and (5) healthy marriages.

The third element I want to focus on is continuity. Here, I intend to characterize the nature of children’s experiences leading to school entry. This might be considered to be another element of the supporting conditions. It seems worth highlighting, however, since it refers to relationships among a potentially large number of supporting conditions that can extend over a number of years. The first five years of life can lend stability to the child’s development through continuity of experiences with family and programs (including child care, Early Head Start, Head Start, prekindergarten programs, and various services), or the period can be disruptive to healthy development. Children who experience child care and other out-of-home care and education settings are at some risk of bouncing from one type of program to another. Programs can provide continuity through their service emphases, or they can be so different as to cause disruption as children move from one setting to another. However, if we want to understand how well children are prepared for school—and why—then readiness assessments should include some measure of the range of children’s program experiences over time, as well as the continuity of that experience from birth to school entry.

**INSTRUMENTS FOR READINESS ASSESSMENT**

The assessment issues related to instrumentation center around the age-old issue, “what can we know and when can we know it?” To answer that question, we need to look at advances in early childhood assessment over the last decade and think about the tough decisions that have to be made.
What Can We Know, and When Can We Know It?

The early childhood field has made tremendous strides in the science of measuring important aspects of children’s early development and learning. As I’ve already noted, a number of national studies—including FACES, ECLS-K, and, for younger children, the Early Head Start program evaluation—have measured developmental constructs and supporting conditions not heretofore included in large-scale assessments. In fact, whereas two decades ago, many of us in this field despaired of ever having a sufficient number of good-quality instruments, the concern now is a glut of instruments, along with the challenging task of selecting among them.

SERVE, for example, has recently published a compendium of assessment instruments. The compendium summarizes 39 commercially available instruments and, in an easy-to-use format, guides potential users to key features of each instrument that should be considered in selecting the instruments to use. Child Trends, working with Lisbeth Schorr and the Pathways Mapping Project, has compiled a compendium of measures used in national, state, and local data collections. It includes largely unpublished sources, while taking a different approach by providing item-level information. This compendium has the advantage of summarizing measures that have been used in data collections that may parallel data collections that states may want to launch for readiness assessment. As with the SERVE compilation, it evaluates the measures along a number of important criteria. No longer can we complain that measures either do not exist or are impossible to access. The challenge instead is one of sorting and sifting, to choose what will be most appropriate and useful for each state’s or community’s purpose.

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Unfortunately, the extensive work already done for us, as reflected just in these two compendia, gets us only to the starting gate. Each of us who wants to obtain valid and reliable data on important dimensions of children’s early development and learning must sift through the hundreds of measures and apply some rather complex, and often conflicting, criteria.

Why the Choices Are So Difficult: There Is No Perfect Answer

It is almost impossible to list all the reasons why there is no perfect answer. As we all know, each measure has strengths and weaknesses; so, even listing the important criteria for evaluating available measures merely highlights the challenges. Nevertheless, the challenges are important, and we must meet them. Even though these criteria have been listed in many places, it may be useful to attempt a consolidated list for our symposium discussions. Some criteria apply to individual measures, but additional factors must be considered when weighing the appropriateness of the collection of measures that will comprise the “readiness” assessment. Here are what I consider the most important criteria to be.

Criteria for Choosing Individual Measures

1. Does it measure what it claims to measure?
2. Does it do so reliably?
3. Has it measured what you want it to measure reliably and validly, under field conditions similar to those where you will use it?
4. Does it tap an important dimension of children’s early development and learning or of the conditions supporting development?
5. Is the measure appropriate for the diversity of children in your state or community, including considerations of socioeconomic status, geographic regions, racial/ethnic background, linguistic groups, and disability status?
6. Is it appropriate for the age(s) of the children you are interested in?
7. Is it available to you at the time you need it?
Criteria for Evaluating the Final Set of Measures

1. Does the set encompass all the dimensions of children’s early development and learning?

2. Does the set of measures also span the conditions supporting early development and learning that are important for your locale?

3. Will analysis of the measures provide aggregate data that will allow you to focus on the collective status of entering kindergartners?

4. Does the collection of measures incorporate multiple modes of assessment (such as direct assessment, parent or teacher ratings, observations, and self-report), so that the final judgment about “readiness” does not hinge on just one or two methods?

5. Are multiple perspectives included, such that ratings do not reflect only teacher judgments but those, for example, of the parents as well?

6. Do the measures, overall, provide a balance of positive and negative indicators of development and learning?

7. Is it feasible (meaning, also affordable) for the data to be collected with quality and consistency across the varied settings in which the assessments need to be completed?

8. If the answer to number 7 is uncertain, can the set of measures be adapted to local circumstances while retaining their essential ingredients?

9. Do some of the measures allow you to compare results with national data? \[1\]

Consideration should also be given to the process of preparing for any large-scale assessment. Who participates in the decision making, and how the participants are involved, are important considerations, as are the issues of design and implementation, which others describe in their symposium papers. Although the process will differ with each state and community, it is important that there be open discussion about the process. In many respects, readiness assessment meets all the criteria for “high-stakes” testing, which engenders so much concern and controversy among the many stakeholders of our children’s educational futures.

\[1\] I do not think this is an essential criterion; nevertheless, it should be considered as a possible advantage for interpreting assessment results.
“EARLY TO LEARN”: DEVELOPING A BROADER PERSPECTIVE

In the concluding section of the paper, I want to briefly suggest a perspective with which to view the assessment enterprise we are discussing this week. In a number of respects, readiness assessment—or, as I prefer to think of it, assessment of children’s early development and learning upon entry into school—can be thought of as program evaluation, but evaluation in a very special sense. Although kindergarten entry is the beginning of a long educational journey for each child, it also represents the culmination of his or her first five years of life. What children know, what they can do, what attitudes and inclinations they have—all are a function of the families they have lived in, the neighborhoods in which they have played, the many (or few) caring adults who have nurtured them (or not), and the programs and activities they have participated in (or not). America’s children have taken ballet lessons, put up with bullies, enjoyed Sesame Street and Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, and been subject to violence and danger. They have attended church, mosque, temple, or synagogue, or not. All of these, and the thousands of other experiences in children’s early lives, contribute to their language, their cognitive and physical abilities, their emotions and social skills, and the way they approach new learning opportunities. Our challenge is to find a practical assessment process that will capture the “outcomes” of these vast and varied experiences.

In my “theory of change” about the first five years of life and what outcomes they should lead to, the expected outcomes look very much like the dimensions of early development and learning that now stand for readiness. It is for these reasons that I put so much stress on finding the measures that do justice to the full and comprehensive dimensions of readiness and to administering them in a way that allows the results of this five-year process to be seen. Let us not shrink from moving forward to screen all children on hearing, vision, and pre-reading.
knowledge, while at the same time understanding the inseparable nature of the children’s range of developmental achievements.
“READINESS” DIMENSIONS IDENTIFIED BY THE GOAL ONE TECHNICAL PLANNING GROUP OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS PANEL

A. Dimensions Based on the Major Conditions that Support Readiness

The family and community conditions that support readiness are spelled out in the three objectives that accompany the goal itself:

- “All children will have access to high quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school;
- Every parent in America will be a child’s first teacher and devote time each day helping his or her preschool child learn; parents will have access to the training and support they need;
- Children will receive the nutrition and health care needed to arrive at school with healthy minds and bodies, and the number of low-birthweight babies will be significantly reduced through enhanced prenatal health systems.12

B. Dimensions and Criteria of Children’s Early Learning, Development, and Abilities

Each of the five dimensions of early learning, development, and abilities includes a number of criteria for assessment.

1. Physical Well-Being and Motor Development

- Physical development (rate of growth, physical fitness, and body physiology; prevention of diseases; disabilities)
- Physical abilities (gross-motor skills, fine-motor skills, sensorimotor skills, oral motor skills, and functional performance)
- Background and contextual conditions of [physical] development (the perinatal context, caregiving environment, and health care utilization; vulnerabilities, such as prenatal alcohol exposure; environmental risks, such as harmful aspects of the community environment)

2. Social and Emotional Development

- **Emotional development** (feeling states regarding self and others, including self-concept; emotions, such as joy, fear, anger, grief, disgust, delight, horror, shame, pride, and guilt; self-efficacy; and the ability to express feelings appropriately, including empathy and sensitivity to the feelings of others)

- **Social development** (ability to form and sustain social relationships with adults and friends, and social skills necessary to cooperate with peers; ability to form and sustain reciprocal relationships; understanding the rights of others; ability to treat others equitably, and to avoid being overly submissive or directive; ability to distinguish between incidental and intentional actions; willingness to give and receive support; ability to balance one’s own needs against those of others, creating opportunities for affection and companionship; ability to solicit and listen to others’ points of view; being emotionally secure with parents and teachers; being open to approaching others with expectations of positive and prosocial interactions, or trust)

3. Approaches Toward Learning

- **Predispositions** (gender, temperament, and cultural patterns and values)

- **Learning styles** (openness to and curiosity about new tasks and challenges; initiative, task persistence, and attentiveness; approach to reflection and interpretation; capacity for invention and imagination; and cognitive approaches [“styles”] to tasks)

4. Language Development

- **Verbal language** (listening, speaking, social uses of language, vocabulary and meaning, questioning, and creative uses of language)

- **Emerging literacy** (literature awareness, print awareness [including assigning verbal labels to familiar letters, sound-letter combinations, and recognizing own name in writing], story sense [beginning, middle, end], and writing process [ordered scribbling, producing writing configurations])

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13 Kagan, Moore, and Bredekamp note that approaches toward learning are particularly important for success in school because the “mere acquisition of knowledge, skills, and capacities is an insufficient criterion…” without children’s inclination to marshal these skills.
5. Cognition and General Knowledge

- **Knowledge** (physical knowledge, logico-mathematical knowledge, and social-conventional knowledge)

- **Cognitive competencies** (representational thought, problem solving, mathematical knowledge, social knowledge, and imagination)
### ATTACHMENT 2:

**HOW HEAD START PERFORMANCE MEASURES ARE ALIGNED WITH THE GOAL ONE DIMENSIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal One Learning and Development Dimension</th>
<th>Head Start Performance Measures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical well-being and motor development</td>
<td>Gross and fine motor skills</td>
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<td>Social and emotional development</td>
<td>Positive social behavior</td>
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<td>Personal maturity</td>
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<td>Behavior problems</td>
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<td>Social interaction with peers</td>
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<td>Social awareness</td>
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<td>Relationships with adults</td>
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<td>Approaches toward learning</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
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<td>Initiative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attitudes toward learning</td>
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<td>Task mastery</td>
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<td>Language development</td>
<td>Emergent literacy and language skills</td>
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<td>Receptive vocabulary</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Letter recognition</td>
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<td>Book knowledge</td>
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<td>Print awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognition and general knowledge</td>
<td>Numerical skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>General memory</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Color naming</td>
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<td>Reasoning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
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<td>Musical ability</td>
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14 The measures are listed on the following page.
MEASURES USED IN THE HEAD START FAMILY AND CHILD EXPERIENCES SURVEY (FACES), 1996-2001
(Bold Italics Indicate Child Assessments)

CHILD
Howes Peer Play Scale
Social Awareness Tasks
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test–III
Phonemic Analysis Subtest (TOLD-3), K and 1
ECLS-K Reading and General Knowledge Assessments (K and 1)
Child Health Profile (First Grade)
McCarthy Draw-A-Design
Color Names and Counting
Woodcock-Johnson Letter-Word Identification (4 years and older)
Woodcock-Johnson Applied Problems (4 years and older)
Woodcock-Johnson Dictation (4 years and older)
Story and Print Concepts
Social Behavior Ratings (Parent, Teacher, Assessor)
Personal Maturity Scale (selected items)(Parent and Teacher)
Problem Behavior Ratings (Parent and Teacher)
Child Observation Record (Social Relationships, Creative Representations, and Music & Movement Subscales) (Teacher)

CLASSROOM
Assessment Profile Scheduling Scale
Assessment Profile Learning Environment Scale
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)
Arnett Scale of Caregiver Behavior
Counts of staff/children

STAFF INTERVIEWS AND REPORTING FORMS
Head Start Teacher Self-Administered Survey
Kindergarten Teacher Self-Administered Survey
Other Staff Interviews

PARENT INTERVIEWS
Family Demographics
Child’s Developmental Accomplishments
Parent-Child Activities
Disabilities
Parent Involvement and Satisfaction with Head Start
Child’s Behavior
Household Rules
Employment and Income

15I am indebted to Louisa Tarullo, Commissioner’s Office of Research and Evaluation, ACYF, for providing this listing of the FACES instruments. Bold Italics indicate the measures that provide data on child outcomes. FACES 2000, a second national cohort study, added the Leiter Sustained Attention Subtest to the child battery, substituted the ECERS-R for the ECERS, added the Assessment Profile Individualizing Scale, and added a father questionnaire.
Community Services
Child Care
Family Health Care
Home Safety
Home and Neighborhood Characteristics
Parent’s Feelings including:
CES-D Depression Scale
Pearlin Mastery Scale
Family Support Scale

CASE STUDY HOME VISIT PARENT INTERVIEWS

*Parents’ Description of Head Start Child*
Primary Reasons for Enrolling Child in Head Start
Hopes and Goals for Head Start Child
Perceptions of Family Strengths
Perceptions of Areas for Family Improvements
Perceptions of Family Problems that May Interfere with Child’s Adjustment to Head Start
A Typical Day for Head Start Child and Family
Family’s Participation and Satisfaction with Head Start
Parenting Beliefs, Hopes, Goals and Satisfaction
Neighborhood Characteristics
Home Observations
Neighborhood Observation Checklist

CASE STUDY MONTHLY TELEPHONE CONTACT INTERVIEWS

Household Composition
*Child Health*
Adult Health
Child Care Arrangements
Employment/Economic Status
Family Participation in Head Start
Family Contact with Community Agencies
Social Support (Intimate, Informational and Instrumental)
Family Resources
Psychological Well-Being (CES-D)
Significant Family Events
Head Start Satisfaction
Transition to Kindergarten

CASE STUDY COMMUNITY AGENCY INTERVIEWS

Type of Agency, Agency Services, Agency Goals and Mission, and Target Population
Organization of Service Delivery and Referral Systems
Collaboration with Head Start
Perception of Relationship with Head Start and Satisfaction