The Inappropriate Use of School “Readiness” Tests

Committee on School Health and Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care

All children who reach the legal age of required school attendance are entitled to an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Most communities offer some form of “school readiness testing” to screen for children with special educational needs, and most schools do this appropriately. However, readiness testing can vary greatly in its sophistication, and can easily be incorrectly applied and interpreted. When instruments and procedures designed for screening are used for diagnostic purposes, or when tests are administered by individuals who have a limited perspective on the variations of normal development, or when staff with little formal training in test administration perform the screening, children can be wrongly identified and their education jeopardized. For these reasons, the use of readiness testing that is designed for screening should not be used to make placement decisions. No child should be excluded from school, placed in a special education setting, or provided with special educational services on the basis of such testing.

The decision that a child will require special educational services for developmental problems should be based upon the analysis of data obtained from individually administered, standardized developmental tests completed by qualified professionals with experience working with children of this age. Such professionals include child psychologists, speech and language pathologists, special education diagnosticians, and pediatricians who have expertise in early childhood development. Special educational placement or services for developmental problems in the preschool and kindergarten years should be recommended only when appropriately administered developmental assessments clearly document significant developmental delays or serious emotional or behavioral problems.

Because normal development is highly variable during the kindergarten and 1st grade years, school programs should be flexible and adaptable to each child’s individual characteristics.

The following principles are important:

1. All children are entitled to education in an environment where the great variability in early childhood development is understood and supported.
2. “Readiness” testing that relies on screening instruments and procedures should not be the sole basis for special education placement or services, nor should it be used to keep a child from access to formal education if the child is of legal age to attend school in that state or community.
3. If readiness screening suggests that the child has significant developmental delays or signs of emotional or behavioral problems, well-standardized tests that evaluate all relevant aspects of development need to be administered to the child in an individual setting by qualified professionals, experienced with children of this age, to determine if special class placement or special services are needed.

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