2.1 Family Assessment

Level at which service providers understand the full range of family strengths and needs

Purpose

One of the potential benefits of a well-functioning early childhood system is that the integration of services and service providers encourages a broader view of family strengths and needs. When families and children identify themselves, or are identified by a service provider or a screening process, as potential beneficiaries of services, there is an opportunity to comprehensively assess family strengths and needs. This measure helps communities understand how well they are carrying out this intention, by examining the assessment processes used in the different services that are part of an early childhood system. In addition to a broad understanding of the level of performance on the measure, conducting this assessment with providers can reveal specific service issues, such as the quality, variability, or even lack of family assessment tools; problems with subjectivity or bias; or other issues that, if addressed, could improve the system's ability to meet a family's needs.

Definition

The family assessment measure examines the extent to which system stakeholders collectively understand a family's full range of strengths and needs. This standard is closely related to two of the other system integration standards—2.2 System Navigation and 2.3 Working Together.

The core questions to be addressed in evaluating *2.1 Family Assessment* are as follows:

- To what extent do services use formal and/or common assessment tools and processes?
- To what extent do assessments address the entire family, rather than just the young child?
- To what extent do assessments attempt to identify both family strengths and needs?
- To what extent do assessments address a full range of potential supports, rather than only the supports that are available from the organization conducting the assessment?

Communities can use the model survey provided below to gather information and stakeholder opinion about this measure. Taking into account the ratings for each of the questions in the survey, communities then assign themselves an overall rating of Level 1 (limited use of standardized intake tools or limited application) through Level 4 (extensive use of standardized intake tools and full family application). After assigning a level, communities are encouraged to identify what, if any, activities or changes they want to commit to based on this self-evaluation.

Implementation

The following guidelines provide the tools to gather and analyze data about how well a community is doing with regard to this measure and a summary of the recommended steps and stakeholders needed.

Tool or Survey

Communities are invited to use the questions on the next page as a starting point for their own, customized tool to solicit the level of input they are seeking, whether through a facilitated meeting with a group of system leaders, a survey of system leaders, a survey of front-line staff, or focus groups or survey for parents. The intention is to both understand assessment processes within an organization and across organizations within a system, whether those organizations are in the same sector or different sectors within the early childhood system.

Summary of Steps

1. **Set intention:** Determine which assessment questions matter to you and your community and how much each matters. This will vary by stakeholder type. For example, home visitors may care about all of the assessment questions while other stakeholders may only want to focus on one or two. Also consider your aspirations associated with each question. Perhaps you only aspire to reach a low or moderate level of maturity for some assessment questions based on community goals and priorities.
2. **Identify stakeholders:** Communities are encouraged to include as many as possible from the list under the Stakeholders heading in addition to others that may be important locally. Confirm and refine intentions/goals with stakeholders.
3. **Identify type of engagement:** There are several options for collecting data for this measure. Communities may use more than one approach.
    a. *Leadership meeting.* Particularly in smaller communities and/or those with a strong multi-sector leadership team, the information can be gathered at an in-person meeting including leaders from each sector. An advantage of this option is that it may also lead to helpful conversations among these leaders.
    b. *Leadership survey.* A second option is to send a survey to leaders in multiple sectors, asking them to answer the four questions in the model survey below with regard to their own programs; staff at the coordinating agency will collect and analyze the responses. An advantage of this option is that it can include a larger number of people and provide more comprehensive information about the range of practices being used by each service type.
    c. *Front-line staff survey.* Communities may ask a sample of front-line workers to answer the questions in the model survey below. This approach is likely to be of greatest interest to communities that are larger and have many providers whom they want to hear from, or to communities that are planning to do a survey of front-line staff in order to evaluate Standards 2.2 and 2.3. For those communities, simply adding the questions about 2.1 may be the most efficient way to gather the additional information.
4. **Gather information:** Gather information from the stakeholders about the assessment practices in use in a variety of service settings. In larger communities, there may be multiple providers for some of these services, so communities will be trying to understand the range of practices in place in order to make a judgment about the practices being used by the largest number of providers. This information gathering could be embedded in a survey tool. Compile results.

5. **Rate:** Taking all of the responses into account, communities can then rate their performance on the standard as a whole, using the scale or levels defined above. It will be useful to tabulate the scores on the individual items and calculate averages, but communities should feel free to use judgment in assigning the rating.
6. **Interpret:** Communities should consider the interpretation question prompts in the Interpreting Results section.
7. **Plan:** Determine what action should be taken as a result of the analysis and record in action planning guide. Use this assessment as an entrée to a larger conversation to support system building efforts.

Stakeholders

Target Sectors

Communities may prefer to target common system access points for the assessment, but given that all early childhood sectors do some form of family intake, the options for inclusion are broad.

Roles For Different Groups of Stakeholders

- **Leadership:** A richer level of engagement, which is more likely to contribute to system improvement, involves engaging a broad range of system stakeholders. This engagement can take place after the survey has been fielded as a way to convene survey respondents to review, discuss and respond to the results. Preferably, however, a workgroup can be engaged at the outset to build buy-in and increase the reach and response rate of the survey.
- **Front-line staff:** An early childhood coordinating agency can send a request to complete a survey tool to front-line service providers who represent the core early childhood system, such as providers working in early care and education, early intervention, clinics or pediatric practices, and/or home visiting. A coordinating agency can learn from the compilation of the results of these surveys, although response rates and the impact of the assessment may be limited without further engagement.
- **Parents:** Parent input may be sought about the extent to which the programs and services they have used have endeavored to understand their families' full range of strengths and needs. Parents may be engaged in a variety of ways: through targeted focus groups; by including parent leaders in the workgroup; or by customizing the survey tool to capture parent perspectives. Soliciting parent input across the first three Coordination measures (2.1, 2.2, and 2.3) would be an efficient exercise and results would provide important context for interpreting the results from the leader or front-line staff surveys.

Data Sources

Early childhood communities create the data to be reviewed and evaluated. They can do so through any of the following means:

- Survey results, as completed by early childhood system administrators and front-line service providers.
- Proceedings of leadership workgroup convenings to discuss survey results.
- Findings from leadership workgroup discussions, if the survey has been used as a set of discussion questions.
- Proceedings of parent focus groups or survey results, if the survey has been modified to elicit parent input.

Prior to collecting data, communities should collect any assessment forms currently in use to inform discussions.

Tips For Successful Implementation

- Work early in the process to get supervisor buy-in to the assessment.
- Be clear about how results will be used and who will have access to the data.
- Have a plan to follow up on results, ideally before the survey is executed.
- Be sensitive to organizations that are fearful that the assessment will cast them in an unfavorable light or respondents who may not feel free to be candid about their experiences; if you expect this issue to be significant, consider adding anonymity to the survey by just asking respondents to identify the sector of the system in which they work, but not the agency itself.
- Since a service provider's tenure can impact the depth and breadth of their informal system connections, surveys should ask for how long the provider has been working in the early childhood system.
- Conduct annually, if possible, to assess where progress is being made and where connections need to be strengthened.
- Knowledge of survey design/science when using a survey tool to gather data will help maximize response and completion rates.

Limitations

The ability to draw conclusions from the data may be limited if there is low agency engagement or there is not cross-sector participation.

2.1 Family Assessment: Survey

The core set of questions about family assessment are below. For each of the questions, communities can use a simple four-point scale, with responses roughly as follows:

1—Not done

2—Done sometimes / done partially*

3—Usually done

4—Done all the time or almost all the time

Respondents can be asked to assign only a numerical answer to each of the five questions, or they can also be given an opportunity to submit remarks explaining their ratings.

1. To what extent do services use formal and/or common assessment tools and processes? Are these home-grown tools or evidence-based, standardized assessments?	1 2 3 4
2. To what extent do assessments address the entire family, rather than only the mother, the father, or the young child?	1 2 3 4
3. To what extent do assessments attempt to identify both family strengths and needs?	1 2 3 4
4. To what extent do assessments address a broad range of potential supports, rather than only the supports that are available from the organization conducting the assessment?	1 2 3 4
5. To what extent do assessments address potential barriers to accessing services and supports?	1 2 3 4

Level 1—Limited use of standardized or evidence-based assessment tools and processes; the assessments conducted by most service providers are significantly limited (to the young child only, to needs but not strengths, to only the services available from the organization doing the assessment).

Level 2—Some of the services have made progress on two or more of the four factors.

Level 3—Most of the services have made progress on two or more of the factors, and some of them have made progress on three or more.

Level 4—While some exceptions may remain, most services have assessment processes incorporating most or all of the factors listed.

** Note regarding choice 2: Consider the example of a provider answering the question about whether assessments address the needs of the entire family. They might score this question a 2 if they get this information sometimes but not usually. Or they might give it the same score if they routinely ask about the needs of some family members—for example, the identified child and the primary caregiver—but don't learn about the needs of other family members.*