

DC: 0-3 may not be an appropriate assessment procedure for early identification purposes

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Infant mental health has become a hot issue. More and more clinicians and early childhood practitioners recognize the importance of social and emotional development during the preschool years. Many have called for the identification of social-emotional disorders and difficulties in young children so that intervention can be started before problems solidify. Some claim that it is never too early to identify social-emotional problems.

The current interest in early social and emotional development has spurred the development of a host of assessment instruments and procedures. One of these is the Zero to Three *Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood*. The DC: 0-3 was designed to assess the presence of mental health and developmental difficulties in the first four years of life. The use of the DC: 0-3 for early

intervention eligibility determination is being suggested or recommended by more and more early childhood practitioners.

The extent to which the DC: 0-3 is appropriate for eligibility determination was the focus of a research synthesis conducted by Carl Dunst, Andrea Storck, and Donna Snyder at the Tracking, Referral and Assessment Center for Excellence. These investigators analyzed 13 studies including more than 2,000 young children. Findings showed that most of the studies were poorly conducted, and that what evidence was available pointed to the fact that the procedure was not very accurate in terms of identifying infant and early childhood social-emotional disorders or difficulties. Two thirds of the studies did not even determine if clinicians agreed on a diagnosis, and findings showed that the classification system fared poorly in terms of differentiating between typically and atypically developing children.

Acting on Evidence

Better designed and implemented studies are needed before the DC: 0-3 should be used for identifying early social-emotional disorders. Until these studies are conducted, the use of the DC: 0-3 for early identification or eligibility determination purposes should occur with caution.



This research summary is based on findings reported in C. J. Dunst, A. Storck, and D. Snyder (2006), Identification of infant and toddler social-emotional disorders using the DC: 0-3 Diagnostic Classification System. *Cornerstones*, 2(2), 1-21.