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Are You READY TO ASSESS Social and Emotional Learning and Development?

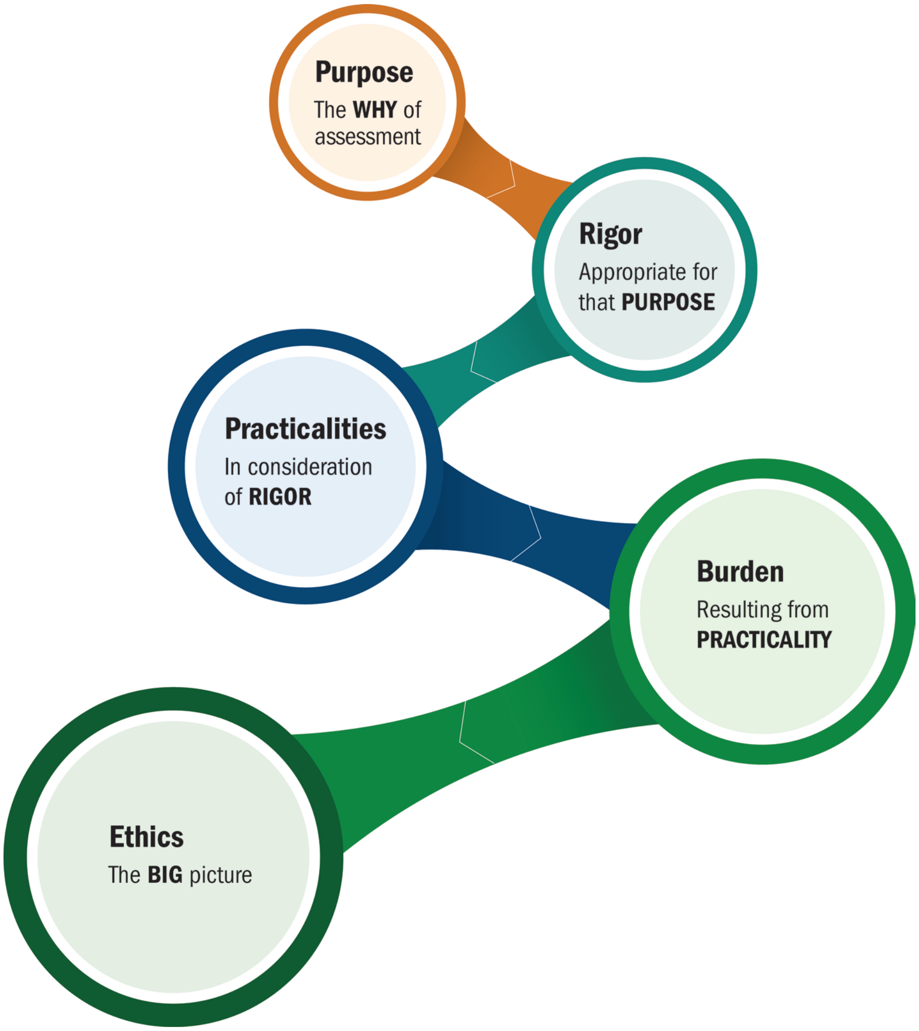
Decision Tree

Introduction

Once you decide whether and how to use assessments to evaluate conditions for learning and development and social and emotional (SE) competencies (i.e., knowledge, attitudes, and skills) you must develop and carefully craft an assessment plan.

Educators, practitioners, and policymakers can benefit from reviewing best practices and using a structured format to arrive at that decision. The *Ready to Assess Brief* lays out, in narrative form, the process for considering the many elements of a well-constructed assessment plan. Here, we provide a *Decision Tree,* which can be used as a roadmap to guide your thinking as you proceed along the *Stop, Think, Act: Ready to Assess* framework.

In the sections that follow, we describe a process for making decisions about using assessments in consideration of:



Purpose

The decision to use any assessment must be grounded by a clear and well-founded purpose. Although it might seem obvious at first, the purpose(s) of an assessment may be highly nuanced and can easily become confounded by competing interests, mixed messaging, or mismatched expectations. In some instances, you will find it advantageous to pursue multiple purposes at once, in which case it is prudent to prioritize them and plan accordingly.

Three common assessment purposes are:

Information | **Communication** | **Accountability**

These three purposes can meet several goals, which may be high stakes or low stakes in nature. Balancing your assessment purposes and goals to clearly define the stakes involved is an important step in the *Decision Tree.* In addition, you should consider whether implementing a new assessment is truly necessary or whether your purposes and goals can be addressed in alternative ways. You may be able to use existing data and assessments. For example, it may be feasible (and more relevant) to use a quality assessment and existing research as a proxy for assessing youth outcomes.

Rigor

After firmly establishing the rationale for using an assessment and the stakes involved, it is important to match your purpose with the appropriate level of rigor. The term rigor, in the context of *Stop, Think, Act: Ready to Assess,* refers to the (1) comprehensiveness of the assessment; (2) degree to which the assessment is a well-established, valid, and reliable measure; and (3) assessment's implementation and use.

Whether your assessment purpose and goals are high stakes or low stakes often determines whether to use a relatively higher- or lower-rigor assessment. Higher-rigor assessments *may* be used for low-stakes purposes where there is capacity to do so, and if you can also ensure that the assessment is administered with minimal added burden and a potentially higher return on investment. In the case of high-stakes purposes, sometimes lower-rigor assessments can add depth to the assessment results.

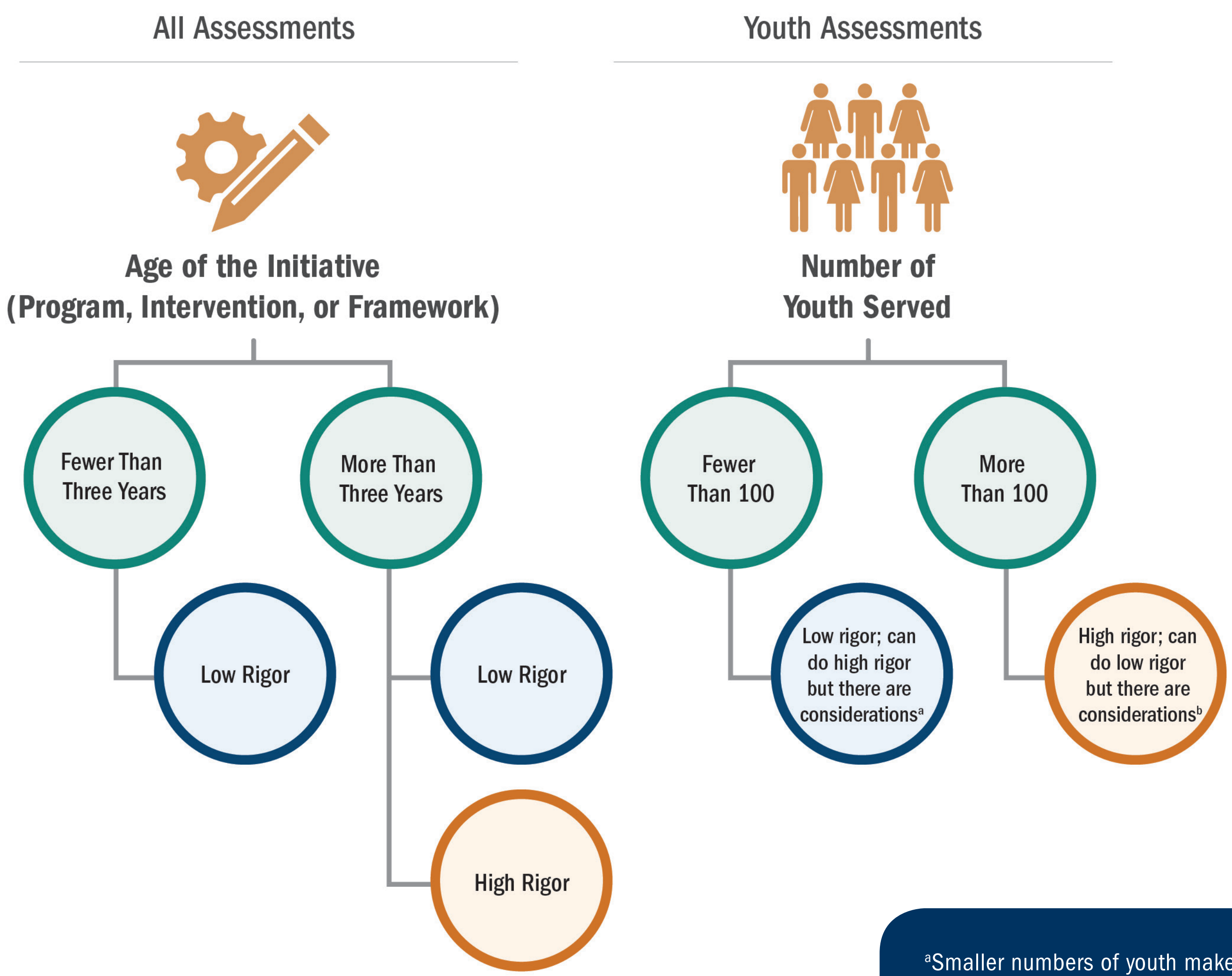
Validity: The degree to which an assessment measures what it is supposed to be measuring (e.g., communication skills) instead of another construct (e.g., mathematics ability).

Reliability: The degree to which an assessment can be expected to produce the same results after being administered multiple times to the same population.

Some assessments require multiple observations or raters, while others function well with a single (i.e., point-in-time) rating. It is important to consider whether a chosen assessment can be administered with fidelity (i.e., according to its guidelines) every time. Then, based on those guidelines, it is critical to understand the ways in which the data may be interpreted and used. Ultimately, deciding whether to use higher- or lower-rigor assessments—or some combination—may require an iterative process that takes into account the entire scope of factors outlined in the *Decision Tree.*

Practicalities

After selecting a level of rigor that matches your purpose, it is essential to consider the age of the SEL program or initiative, and, if you are assessing youth SE competencies, the number of youth engaged in the SEL program or initiative. In some cases, this evaluation may require revising the level of rigor previously chosen or building capacity to meet those practicalities. While the purpose and goal of assessment may align with a given level of rigor, practical constraints related to available infrastructure (technology, labor, and time) and statistical limitations may restrict the utility of the corresponding assessments.



[a]Smaller numbers of youth make it more challenging to draw conclusions from the data gained via assessment because of a lack of statistical power.

[b]Lower rigor assessments—especially authentic assessments—frequently require more staff and time; it is challenging to implement this type of assessment with larger groups.

Burden

After matching the purpose and rigor of your assessment plan and performing a check for practicality, it is time to evaluate the burden. Burden may include time to administer the assessment, training necessary to use the assessment and/or interpret the data, or implementation costs. One must assess the risks, benefits, capacity, and costs to youth and families, staff, infrastructure, and finances.

Consider the population of youth. Does the benefit of the assessment outweigh the burden?

- **Yes** — Have you informed youth and families about the assessment and obtained consent?
  - **Yes** — Consider your staff next.
  - **No** — Retrace your steps with this in mind.
- **No** — Go back to the beginning of the Tree with this in mind.

Consider your staff. Can staff allocate the time and energy needed to administer the assessment?

- **Yes** — Do your staff have the expertise to administer the assessment?
  - **Yes** — Consider your data management processes next.
  - **No** — Retrace your steps with this in mind. Consider how you can build your staff capacity first, or contract out those services.
- **No** — Retrace your steps with this in mind. Reflect on your priorities for staff.

Consider your data collection and data management processes. Do you have the capacity to collect, process, analyze, and securely house your assessment data?

- **Yes** — Do you have processes in place for using the data to inform practice?
  - **Yes** — Finally, consider your finances.
  - **No** — Consider the processes for data use that are most appropriate for the assessment and make a plan.
- **No** — Consider the kinds of data storage, staff training, and outsourcing that is most appropriate for the assessment and make plans for how you will do this.

Consider your finances. Do you have the funds to purchase the assessment?

- **Yes** — Do you have the funds to allocate to the implementation costs?
  - **Yes** — Write out your budget and outline your *Decision Tree* selections. Do one final check for ethics.
  - **No** — Retrace your steps, determine whether you can lower costs, or consider holding off on the assessment.
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Ethics

Evaluating whether an assessment is ethical is the final step. This step requires carefully retracing the choices selected from the *Decision Tree.* An assessment of any kind should not be taken lightly, and an assessment of conditions for learning and development or an individual's SE competencies is no exception. At this time, convene your team members and evaluate how use of the assessment and its associated potential risks and benefits will align with the larger mission of the organization and the community. Key ethical questions you may ask include:

1. Does this assessment align with our organizational mission, values, and purpose?
2. Does the benefit of having the data outweigh the risks to participants of collecting it?
3. Are we administering an assessment to a group already burdened with surveys and observations?
4. Is our purpose aligned with the rigor of the assessment?
5. Does this team comprise people with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and training necessary to select an appropriate assessment?
6. Do we have the capacity to ensure that the assessment is administered in a standardized manner, with appropriate accommodations for people of all abilities and languages?
7. Is there evidence for using the assessment with our intended groups?
8. Will our interpretation of the assessment results fit within the intended purpose and use of the assessment?
9. How will we use data from the assessment and make it meaningful to the people from whom it was gathered?
10. How will we ensure that we highlight strengths and areas for growth (avoiding stigmatizing language) when communicating assessment results?

Summary

Before you decide on an assessment strategy, make sure you are ready by considering the purpose, rigor, practicalities, and burden of the assessment to ensure that you get what you need from your assessment at the lowest possible cost to those involved. You can use *Stop, Think, Act: Ready to Assess* periodically to reexamine your assessment needs as the circumstances and contexts evolve.

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