

Many benefits are gained from gathering information from families to complete the DRDP (2015). Even though these benefits are widely recognized, some practitioners question the reliability and validity of information provided by parents; other practitioners wonder what to do when family and practitioner observations do not agree. The following discussion, from supported by research findings, addresses these questions.

## What are the Benefits of Inviting Families to Share their Observations?

The DRDP (2015) assessment instrument is based on naturalistic observation; assessors complete the instrument by continually observing children as they participate in typical activities and routines and documenting their progress. In addition to direct observation, assessors should invite family members (and other providers and caregivers) to share their observations about the child. This is especially important when the assessor has limited contact with the child. If the child attends a general education early childhood program or infant/toddler program and receives only related special education services, such as speech therapy, then the primary IFSP or IEP service provider should ask both family members and the general education teacher for their observations. Asking parents to share their observations is also particularly useful for those skills the child might not demonstrate routinely in the educational setting. Parents have repeated opportunities to observe their child over time and across settings as they interact with toys, other children, and adults. As a result, parents' descriptions of their child's behavior in the home or in community settings will add to the assessor's knowledge about the child's behavior across settings and will help the assessor make more confident ratings. Gathering parental perspectives about child development and behavior provides important and ecologically valid data, which is useful for making informed assessment and intervention decisions.



## Are Families' Observations Reliable and Valid?

Despite the many benefits of having families' observations inform assessment decisions, practitioners frequently question whether information provided by parents about child development and behavior is *reliable* and *valid*. *Reliability* reflects the extent to which information is consistent, including consistent across time or observers. For example, if two assessors are consistent in their rating of a DRDP (2015) for a particular child, their scores would be considered to be reliable or consistent across assessors. *Validity* refers to the types of meaningful inferences that can be made from information or data provided. For example, language samples gathered from young children in authentic settings might permit meaningful [valid] inferences about a child's communication skills in everyday activities.

Two terms have dominated the empirical literature focused on the reliability and validity of parental perspectives about child development and behavior: *overestimation* and *underestimation*. The term *parental overestimation* stems mainly from empirical studies conducted from the early 1950s through the 1990s that examined parent and professional congruence (meaning consistency or agreement) about child developmental and behavioral status. Many of these studies reported that parents overestimated their child's developmental status or behavior when compared to estimates obtained from professionals (see Snyder, Thompson, & Sexton, 1993; Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994 for a review of this literature). These studies suffered from procedural or methodological limitations, however, and did not permit definitive conclusions about parental overestimation (see Snyder, Thompson, & Sexton, 1993 for a comprehensive review of limitations). For example, in many studies, different instruments were used by parents and professionals to report perspectives about child development or behavior. Parents often completed judgment-based rating scales designed to gather information about child development or behavior while professionals administered a standardized test directly to the child. These variations in the instruments and approaches used to gather information introduced confounds that led researchers to suggest that parental overestimation might be an artifact of the methods used. In the 1980s, Beckman (1984) and Gradel, Thompson, and Sheehan (1981) suggested that it might be equally likely that professionals *underestimate* child status, particularly when professionals only gather information at a single point in time in a standardized testing situation. In fact, Snyder et al. (1993) found that 73 pairs of professionals and parents had very high levels of consistency and agreement about child development and behavior when they completed the same instruments in the same way and had repeated opportunities to observe the 73 children in the study sample over time. These findings suggest that not only are family observations reliable and valid, they are considered essential as part of a comprehensive assessment process.

## Do Family Observations Always Have to Agree with Professional Observations?

Although congruence (i.e., consistency or agreement) in observations might be important in some situations, contemporary perspectives in early childhood assessment suggest that both parents and professionals have important information to share about children. As Suen, Logan, Neisworth, and Bagnato (1995) noted, professional observations are reliable snapshots of children's behavior in certain settings (e.g., classrooms), whereas parental perspectives are based on a full-length feature film that provides rich information to enhance professional observations. Thus, rather than focusing on parental overestimation or professional underestimation, we should recognize the value of each perspective for gaining a more complete picture of the child across people and settings.

## How Do I Consider Parental Perspectives when they Vary from My Observations?

In the context of the DRDP (2015) assessment, professionals should seek parental perspectives about child development and behavior. When parental perspectives vary from the practitioner's observations, consider the following:

1. It is important to make sure that families understand the meaning of the DRDP (2015) items. Professionals understand expected sequences of child development and are trained about how items on the DRDP (2015) reflect these sequences. Parents might not understand fully the meaning of DRDP (2015) items without explanations or examples. It may be useful to provide families with examples of the kinds of behaviors to look for or the routines and activities that might provide a context for an item. For example, rather than ask a parent to describe a child's grasping pattern, you might inquire about how a child picks up small pieces of cereal during mealtime.
2. It may be reasonable for the observations of parents and practitioners to differ, given the child's range of behaviors for the item being rated. For example, parents might have many more opportunities to observe a child's dressing or feeding skills than a professional.
3. Child behavior might differ across activities and routines that occur in a classroom setting versus home or community settings. We know children's behavior is context dependent. It is important to understand how variations in activities and routines that occur in classrooms versus those that occur in home and community settings might influence child behavior and DRDP (2015) observations. For example, children's interactions with familiar adults might vary across school and community settings. For example, a child may communicate verbally at home but be very quiet at school where more people are talking at one time.

Remember, not all perspectives about children's behavior based on parent or professional observations need to be congruent. Rather, aim for convergence or the pooling of perspectives from those who know the child best and have repeated opportunities to observe behavior across settings and time.

### **Recommendation: Assessors should invite parents to share their observations to help inform the completion of the DRDP (2015)**

Inviting parents to share their observations of their children's development and behavior is considered recommended practice in the field and for the DRDP (2015) assessment. Parents' observations are useful for informing both assessment, instructional, and intervention decisions. When combined with practitioners' observations, the perspectives of parents help assessors converge on a more complete picture of children across settings. Research findings suggest that parents' observations are reliable and valid and should be considered essential components of a comprehensive assessment process.

## References

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