



# The Role of Family Observations

in the Desired Results Developmental  
Profile Assessment System

Numerous benefits may be gained from using family observations to inform the completion of the DRDP instruments. Even though these benefits are well-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, based on insights from research, addresses these questions.

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

The DRDP assessment instruments are based on naturalistic observation; assessors complete the instruments by continually observing children in typical daily activities and routines and documenting their progress. In addition to direct observation, assessors will also find it useful to invite family members (and other caregivers) to share their observations. This is especially important when the assessor has limited contact with the child. If the child attends a general education early childhood program and receives only related special education services, such as speech therapy, then the primary IEP service provider might find it very useful to ask both the family 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. For example, a teacher or therapist might not regularly observe some of the child's self-care skills. 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 help assessors make more accurate ratings and can add to the assessor's information about the child's behavior across settings. 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 the DRDP, their scores would be considered to be reliable. *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.

Two terms dominate 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 assessment system, 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 items. Professionals understand expected sequences of child development and are trained about how items on the DRDP reflect these sequences. Parents might not understand fully the meaning of DRDP 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 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 observations. For example, children's interactions with familiar adults might vary across school and community settings.

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.

### **Summary – Inviting Parents' Observations is Recommended Practice**

Inviting parents to share their observations of their children's development and behavior is considered recommended practice for the DRDP assessment system. Parents' observations provide useful data for informing both assessment 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 an essential component of a comprehensive assessment process.

### **References**

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