



**Arizona Association of School Psychologists**  
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## **BEST PRACTICES IN THE USE OF DEVELOPMENTAL DELAY IN ARIZONA**

The Arizona Association of School Psychologists concurs with the National Association of School Psychologists' position that early identification of and intervention for developmental and learning problems in young children occurs best via a non-categorical service delivery model (NASP, 2009). Arizona's adoption of the special education eligibility Developmental Delay (DD) benefits children, families, and school districts while promoting best practices in early childhood assessment.

### **DEFINITION**

Consistent with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), Developmental Delay is applicable to children who are at least three years of age, but under ten years of age. Arizona's eligibility for Developmental Delay under Part B of IDEA is based on performance on a norm-referenced test that measures at least one and one-half, but not more than three, standard deviations below the mean for children of the same chronological age in two or more of the following areas: (a) cognitive development (b) physical development (c) communication development (d) social or emotional development (e) adaptive development. The results of the norm-referenced measure must be corroborated by information from a comprehensive developmental assessment that includes parental input, if available, as measured by a judgment-based assessment or survey. If there is a discrepancy between the measures, the evaluation team shall determine eligibility based on a preponderance of the information presented.

The school district can conduct a reevaluation and change a child's eligibility at any time. However, a child must be reevaluated prior to turning ten as school districts will not receive funding for students under the DD category once they reach their tenth birthday. Some children will continue to be eligible for special education services under a different disability category. Other children will no longer be eligible for or require special education services and will be exited from the system.

### **RATIONALE**

Developmental Delay was developed to deliver services to students who potentially had disabilities that could not yet be specifically identified, as well as to deliver services to students with needs who could potentially avoid future special education identification if they received early intervention services (Danaher, 2007).

The assessment of young children has limited validity and reliability. Using a non-categorical eligibility enables teams to address students' needs without having to identify a specific disability. Waiting until students are older before conducting an educational evaluation with directly administered standardized testing ensures that the results are

more likely to be stable over time and can be more reliably used for special education eligibility in a specific school-age category (NASP, 2005). Also, using DD up to age ten maintains consistency with federal regulations. Finally, the use of Developmental Delay reduces redundant testing upon transition to kindergarten and allows school teams to focus on developing a new IEP using current levels of performance and ongoing progress monitoring data. Goals and services are dictated by the student's needs rather than by a category or label.

## **RESOURCES**

Further information regarding the research supporting the use of Developmental Delay is available through National Association of School Psychologists and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)/Division of Early Childhood (DEC):

[http://www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/pospaper\\_eca.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/pospaper_eca.aspx)

[http://www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/positionpapers/EarlyChildhoodAssessment.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/positionpapers/EarlyChildhoodAssessment.pdf)

[http://www.decspec.org/pdf/positionpapers/PositionStatement\\_DevDelay.pdf](http://www.decspec.org/pdf/positionpapers/PositionStatement_DevDelay.pdf)

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **1) Are school districts required to use Developmental Delay?**

No. IDEA Regulations Section 300.111(b)(2) states that a public education agency is not required to use the developmental delay category. A school district may choose to use Developmental Delay consistent with the age range described in Arizona law or for any subset of the age range. For example, a school district may decide to adopt DD for students aged three through six. Keep in mind that Developmental Delay has replaced Preschool Moderate Delay and the definition remains the same.

### **2) How does DD fit in with Response to Intervention?**

Response to Intervention is a problem-solving process that includes screening all students to determine their current level in an academic (or behavioral) area and providing instruction to remediate the identified skill deficits while monitoring progress along the way. Students in elementary school who transition from preschool with DD eligibility should not be excluded from the RTI process. In addition to providing instructional support to the student, the information gleaned throughout the process will be helpful to the Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team when they convene to review existing data for reevaluation.

### **3) Can we use RTI to make an initial determination of Developmental Delay?**

No. Response to Intervention, under certain circumstances, may be used to identify students with a Specific Learning Disability, not DD.

### **4) Can we use DD to provide services to slow learners at the elementary level?**

The so-called “slow learner” is a student who struggles in school presumably because of their lower than average intellectual functioning. The slow learner has neither mental retardation nor a specific learning disability and is often designated as the type of student who “falls between the cracks.” Some educators have raised questions regarding the use of developmental delay as a way to deliver special education services, albeit temporarily, to slow learners. General education curricula should be differentiated to meet the needs of students of varying skills and abilities. Special education services are provided to students with educational disabilities, not students who need extra help or tutoring. Using DD to deliver a temporary dose of special education may impede the momentum to develop general curricula that meet the needs of all students. That being said, however, part of the rationale for a non-categorical early childhood label like DD is to deliver special education services and supports to students who are at risk for academic failure and prevent the need for prolonged special education services later in a student’s school career. School psychologists have an ethical responsibility to ensure that students are not categorized as having a disability if they do not. This is no less true for DD than for any other special education category.

Effective services for students at-risk for failure include research-based interventions to address skill deficits as determined by valid, reliable data collection and ongoing progress monitoring. The ideal is for these services to be delivered to all students through a comprehensive general education problem-solving model. However, there may be circumstances when these services are most appropriately delivered via special education services and supports through DD. School psychologists should conduct evaluations that inform instruction and work with school teams to ensure that once students are identified with a Developmental Delay, the focus is on meeting their needs, monitoring their progress, and considering discharge when the students are demonstrating skills commensurate with their grade-level peers.

School psychologists should be leaders in the change from a medical model of diagnosing a deficit within the child toward advocating for and helping to implement comprehensive services for all students. Information regarding the school psychologist’s role in service delivery for young children can be found at

[http://www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/positionpapers/EarlyChildhoodServices.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/positionpapers/EarlyChildhoodServices.pdf)

### **5) When do we consider DD for a school-age child?**

Developmental Delay is an eligibility category for identifying young children when the team suspects a disability but is not confident in making a specific eligibility determination with the less reliable testing options available for assessing very young children.

School teams at the elementary level evaluate for special education services based on an area of suspected disability. If a school team does not suspect a specific categorical eligibility (such as a specific learning disability, autism, or mental retardation) they

should reconsider the need for an educational evaluation. The identification of an elementary-level student with DD should only occur after the assessment is completed in the area of suspected disability and proves inconclusive.

Teams should not view DD as an item on the eligibility menu when they set out to evaluate a student. An analogy would be the use of the category Multiple Disabilities. Teams do not set out to do an evaluation for MD. They evaluate for the suspected disabilities (e.g., mental retardation or an emotional disability); MD is determined based upon the outcome of the evaluation.

**6) If a team is considering DD for a school-age student, must a comprehensive developmental assessment (CDA) be completed?**

Yes. All five domains of the CDA must be addressed, either via reviewing existing data or collecting additional data in the domains for which there is no current available data.

**7) What does a CDA for a school-age child look like?**

Young children can be difficult to test, and assessments developed for use with young children tend to have poor reliabilities as well as weak predictive validity. Given these limitations, test results should always be interpreted cautiously. While the DD criteria specifies scores be obtained on standardized assessment tools, assessment must be supplemented with teacher and parent reports, informal assessment techniques, and formal and informal observations in multiple environments.

When a school-age student is being considered for DD, the evaluation team will need to determine how all five assessment domains are to be addressed (Communication, Cognitive, Physical, Adaptive, and Social-Emotional). This will require determining how standard evaluation techniques (those that would have been completed for consideration of another disability) are to be supplemented with additional measures. There are comprehensive assessment batteries available. However, the team might also choose to use cognitive and language tests, along with a measure of adaptive behavior. A behavior checklist might provide evidence of a social-emotional delay. For school-aged children, assessment of physical development will be the most challenging.

**8) What type of cognitive measure is appropriate for a school-age CDA?**

Any psychometrically sound measure of intellectual ability appropriate for use with young children may be used. In selecting assessment instruments, the school psychologist should ensure that the test selected has an adequate floor and that it is neither culturally biased nor reflective of environmental or educational experience.

School psychologists should follow best practices in intellectual assessment which indicates that, unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, the overall score is the most valid and reliable measure of cognitive ability (Sattler, 2008).

**9) Does having DD as a school-age option mean that students referred for articulation or speech only now have to be tested in all areas?**

No. A school-aged student must be evaluated in the area of suspected disability.

**SUMMARY**

In summary, Developmental Delay is designed for the identification of young children and will help facilitate transitions from preschool to kindergarten. School districts may choose to use DD consistent with the age range described in Arizona law or for any subset of the age range. A comprehensive developmental assessment is required anytime a child is being considered for DD. School teams are reminded that, no matter what the eligibility category, special education services are designed for those students who have a disability and need special education services in order to make adequate educational progress.

**REFERENCES**

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Jerome M. Sattler.

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