

# The validity and implications of parenting capacity assessments for parents in vulnerable circumstances

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# Purpose of parenting capacity assessments

To give an indication of an individual's ability to effectively parent their child/ren

- To determine eligibility for services
- To detect changes in key outcomes
- To design effective interventions
- To inform decisions about a child's care

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## Assessment perspectives

**Categorical** – extent to which person meets criteria for a certain category

Assessment of vulnerable families often takes a categorical perspective.

**Functional** – emphasises current knowledge, skills and circumstances.

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## Beware of Assumptions

- The diagnosis/label a parent attracts can predict their parenting competency
- This diagnosis/label predicts lack of amenability to intervention
- This diagnosis/label means that the parent is forever unfit.

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## Assessment methods

Is it **valid** – does it measure parenting?

- E.g., IQ tests don't pick up changes in parenting

Is it **reliable** – does it give consistent results?

- E.g., if we repeat the test, will it give us the same result?

Is it **appropriate** – format and delivery?

- E.g., pen and paper assessments for people with reading difficulties.

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## Best Practice

- In the family home wherever possible
- Direct observation wherever possible
- Task analyses can be used in conjunction with direct observation to help workers identify in advance what is to be observed.
- Where possible use measures with good psychometric properties.

# Task analysis example

## Washing child's hands (Task analysis)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Session: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1 Takes child to sink.
- 2 Stands child on a stable chair if child can not reach sink.
- 3 If tap has single handle for hot and cold, turns handle to cold before turning tap on.
- 4 Turns cold tap on so that water runs steadily.
- 5 Tests temperature of the running water.
- 6 If water is hot, waits for cold water to flow from tap.
- 7 Assists child to wet hands under running water.
- 8 Assists child to apply a small amount of liquid soap to hands, or rub a bar of soap between hands.
- 9 Assists child to scrub between fingers, under fingernails, on back of hands and in palms.
- 10 Assists child to rinse hands.
- 11 Turns off tap.

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# Strengths & Stressors Tracking Tool

Items based on evidence of factors that contribute to child maltreatment in vulnerable families

- Environment
- Parental capabilities
- Family safety
- Social support
- Family interactions
- Child well being

Reliable and valid (Berry, Cash, Matheison, 2003)

[www.psych.uic.edu/uicnrtc/cmhs/Strengths-StressorTracking.Berry.doc](http://www.psych.uic.edu/uicnrtc/cmhs/Strengths-StressorTracking.Berry.doc)

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## Assessment process

The experience of assessment and threat of child removal can impact on parenting performance and the interactions parents have with their kids.

- Engagement
- Attitudes

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# Acquiescence and the Cloak of Competence

Very important with vulnerable families

**Acquiescence** – tendency to say ‘yes’ or agree with statements regardless of the content

**Cloak of Competence** – e.g., a parent who can’t read, pretends that she can.

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## Tips for dealing with acquiescence

If suspected, check for it – compare self report with other information

Use pairs of related questions – do you like meetings in the morning or afternoon?

Use pictures for ratings if appropriate

Try to prevent it happening in the first place by.....

## Preventing acquiescence

- Include an “I don’t know” option
- Either/or questions rather than yes/no “Are you happy or sad?”
- Keep questions short and simple
- Allow enough time for a response
- If yes/no questions must be used – different phrasing to check information. E.g., “Would you like to move?” “Do you like living here?”
- Open-ended questions are best
- Factual and concrete questions, ask for examples.

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## Checking for Understanding

- Ask the parent to explain a comment you have made, or to tell you more about it.  
“Can you tell me what ‘assessment’ means?”
- Ask parent to repeat information back to you rather than just asking “Do you understand?”.  
E.g., “What will happen next time I visit?”.

[http://www.healthystart.net.au/pdf/Checking\\_for\\_understanding\\_v3\\_\(oc\).pdf](http://www.healthystart.net.au/pdf/Checking_for_understanding_v3_(oc).pdf)



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# 10 guiding principles for parenting capacity assessments

## ***Process***

1. Assessment is predominantly child focussed
2. Uses language and communication that parents can understand
3. Assessment should be balanced and approached sensitively

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## ***Content***

4. Contextual and functional approach
5. Psychometric testing should not be main source of assessment
6. Identify parent strengths as well as needs.
7. Identify supports and services available and evaluate outcomes
8. Is parent able to provide 'good enough' parenting?

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## ***Outcomes***

9. Realistic and feasible recommendations
10. A range of options should be considered, taking into account the possibility of parental, social and environmental change, growth and development.

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# Conclusions

- There is no perfect measure – so make sure that you keep these best practice principles in mind.
- Functional-contextual approach is best
- Avoid using categories, labels, or diagnoses to inform parenting assessments.
- Best to actually observe skills in the parents home when possible.

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## Further information

- Parenting Assessment Practice Point
- Best Practice in Parenting Support:  
Understanding and Supporting Parents with  
Learning Difficulties

<http://www.healthystart.net.au>

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