

Observing and Rating the Approaches to the Learning–Self-Regulation Domain of the Desired Results Developmental Profile

Introduction and Background

Infant and toddler assessment is a valuable part of a high-quality early care and education system aimed at promoting well-being. Assessment builds knowledge of how children organize their development and helps identify needed supports. Research has found problems with reliability and validity when assessing infants and toddlers, such as the lack of differentiation in infants, the substantial developmental growth that occurs from infancy to preschool, and the varying role the environment plays in how children's abilities appear in this timeframe (Van Hemel & Snow, 2008). The Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) is one such assessment instrument used in California. Teachers use the DRDP to gather information to support children's learning and development and to guide instruction (Desired Results Access Project, n.d.).

The following tool (page 3) is intended to support infant toddler teachers' use of the DRDP and to promote understanding of infant toddler development and needs. The tool specifically helps teachers observe and rate the Approaches to Learning—Self-Regulation (ATL-REG) domain of the DRDP. It is the culmination of a codesigned study sponsored by Tipping Point Community on behalf of its infant toddler awardees: The Unity Council, Izzi Early Education, and Kidango. Tipping Point Community partnered with James Bell Associates to facilitate the codesign process as described in Appendix A.

Importance of Developmental Observation

Developmental observation is key to informing classroom activities and practices that meet the needs—and capture the interest—of children in early care and education programs. Observing children and objectively recording their actions (e.g., “the child cried when they fell down” versus “the child felt sad that they fell down”) can provide the evidence and anecdotes needed to rate a child’s development. By reviewing observations, programs can identify areas of the environment that are challenging to children and may need adaptations, start to recognize patterns in engagement, and gauge children’s reactions to different objects and experiences. This knowledge informs individualized care and relationship building.

The Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center provides a host of resources on observation, screening, and assessment specific to infants and toddlers. These include—

- A [guide](#), “Child Observation: The Heart of Individualizing Responsive Care for Infants and Toddlers”
- The [courses](#) “Ongoing Assessment” and “Planning for Learning” for infant and toddler teachers
- A [vignette](#) that programs can use to think about “Assessment for Individualization”
- Ongoing child assessment [resources](#) for infants and toddlers
- An [implementation guide](#), “Using the ELOF [Early Learning Outcomes Framework] to Inform Assessment”

The Desired Results Developmental Profile

Approaches to the Learning—Self-Regulation Domain

Developmental Levels

Responding	Exploring	Building	Integrating
<p>Young infants have a limited ability to maintain attention and comfort themselves. They rely on adults for comfort, learning opportunities, and objects to respond to and for modeling behaviors.</p>	<p>Older (mobile) infants and young toddlers are more able to maintain attention and comfort themselves, but they still seek, need, or benefit from adult support in these areas. They are more curious and increasingly explore their environment. They try out techniques that adults model for regulating feelings and actions.</p>	<p>Toddlers are able to maintain attention and practice self-comforting and self-regulation strategies on their own, but they may ask questions and seek support when needed.</p>	<p>By late preschool, children are able to seek and engage in more challenging learning experiences and to apply more complex self-regulation skills. This level is not observed in the infant toddler years.</p>

Measures

Measure	Definition	Big ideas
Attention maintenance	Child develops the capacity to pay attention to people, things, or the environment when interacting with others or exploring play materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing—Does the child focus their gaze on something of interest? • Sustaining attention—Does the child keep attending to something of interest for any amount of time?
Self-comforting	Child develops the capacity to comfort or soothe self in response to distress from internal or external stimulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-calming—Does the child engage in strategies to calm themselves on their own? • Using adults to calm self—Does the child seek adult support (touch, conversation, etc.) to calm themselves?
Imitation	Child mirrors, repeats, and practices the actions or words of others in increasingly complex ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mimicking others' words or actions—Does the child recognize facial expressions or verbalizations and try to repeat them?
Curiosity and initiative in learning	Child explores the environment in increasingly focused ways to learn about people, things, materials, and events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating curiosity—Does the child show interest in new things? • Exploring the environment—Does the child seek stimulation from their environment?
Self-control of feelings and behavior	Child increasingly develops strategies for regulating feelings and behavior and becomes less reliant on adult guidance over time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulating feelings—Does the child direct strong emotions in a healthy way? • Regulating behavior—Does the child control their behavior while experiencing a strong emotion? • Developing strategies for both—Does the child use techniques to regulate that have been successful in the past?

Explanation of Tool

This DRDP infant toddler observation and rating tool is designed to assist infant toddler teachers in assigning ratings in the ATL-REG domain of the DRDP. The tool contains three components:

- An overview of what children’s development in the ATL-REG domain as a whole looks like across the DRDP levels
- Definitions of each measure within the ATL-REG domain from the DRDP (California Department of Education, 2013–2019)
- Questions to prompt thinking about the big developmental ideas within each measure

If you would like to use this tool in your program, see Appendix B for a worksheet that can be used to gather feedback from staff about their experience using the tool in practice. This worksheet has been used by 17 infant toddler teachers involved in the tool codesign and testing process. Their feedback was used to refine the tool and tool-in-practice worksheet and to identify next steps in building off of this process.

DRDP Levels

The measures included in the ATL-REG domain of the DRDP represent five interconnected skills that children develop during their infant and toddler years. The ability to maintain attention, engage with learning opportunities, and appropriately control emotions and behavior serves as a foundation for future development. The five skills included in the ATL-REG domain develop in similar trajectories across infancy and toddlerhood, each beginning with high reliance on adults for children to be successful, with children developing increasing independence over time.

- **Responding**—Young infants have a limited ability to maintain attention and comfort themselves. They **rely on adults** for comfort, learning opportunities, and objects to respond to and for modeling behaviors. Contributing to this reliance are young infants’ stage of brain development (e.g., the prefrontal region of the brain is not yet developed enough for infants to sufficiently regulate on their own) and physical development (e.g., they are not yet mobile). Adults are responsible for holding and feeding infants and for making sure objects and activities are in their proximity.
- **Exploring**—Older (mobile) infants and young toddlers are more able to maintain attention and comfort themselves, but they still **seek, need, or benefit from adult support** in these areas. They are more curious and increasingly explore their environment. They try out techniques that adults model for regulating feelings and actions. This exploration is possible because children are becoming more mobile and developing more refined motor skills. It helps developing infants and toddlers start to learn what works for them and what they are interested in, but they still may find themselves in situations where they are uncertain of what to do or how to manage what they are feeling. In these cases, they will turn to adults, or if adults offer support, they will be more successful.

- **Building**—Toddlers can maintain attention and practice self-comforting and self-regulation strategies on their own, but they may **ask questions and seek support when needed**. They practice these new skills largely independently, which is possible because of the more refined problem-solving skills and regulation strategies they can practice due to their progressing brain development. At this stage, toddlers may turn to adults with specific requests for support if needed (e.g., a child cuddles with a specific stuffed animal to comfort themselves but asks an adult to get it for them if it is located somewhere they cannot reach); this is possible because of the more effective communication skills they have developed.
- **Integrating**—Although not applicable to infants and toddlers, the integrating level captures the skills of preschoolers, when children can **seek and engage** in more challenging learning experiences and can apply more complex self-regulation skills. This level is not observed in the infant toddler years.

Big Ideas

Attention Maintenance

This measure captures children’s ability to focus on people, things, or the environment and then maintain their attention.

- **Responding earlier**—Infants briefly focus on or react to things of interest.
- **Responding later**—They can shift that brief focus between two different things of interest.
- **Exploring earlier**—Children maintain attention on their own or with adult support during brief activities.
- **Exploring later**—Children maintain attention on their own or with adult support during extended activities.
- **Building earlier**—Children maintain their attention during extended activities without adult support.

Self-Comforting

This measure captures children’s ability to calm themselves when they experience negative emotions by using strategies on their own or by seeking adult support to assist.

- **Responding earlier**—Infants respond to stimuli in ways that are largely instinctual.
- **Responding later**—They repeat responses that have successfully calmed them previously.
- **Exploring earlier**—Children’s responses to stimuli are a more nuanced version of those from the responding later level, and they seek out specific familiar adults or objects for comfort.
- **Exploring later**—Responses become situation dependent, with children able to apply specific strategies to specific situations.
- **Building earlier**—Children’s self-comforting strategies are no longer solely responsive but can be used before experiencing stimuli, potentially making the strategies unnecessary.

Imitation

This measure captures the way children recognize and try to repeat others' facial expressions, actions, and verbalizations.

- **Responding earlier**—Infants respond to others' actions in ways that are largely instinctual.
- **Responding later**—They attempt to mimic the facial expressions and sounds that others make.
- **Exploring earlier**—Children's mimicking is successful for simple facial expressions or sounds.
- **Exploring later**—Children can mimic multiple actions (e.g., facial expression and accompanying sound) or mimic familiar actions after time has passed and the child is no longer actively observing them.
- **Building earlier**—The mimicry is more complex, potentially repeating multiple steps of others' actions or using entire phrases heard previously.

Curiosity and Initiative in Learning

This measure captures children's inherent curiosity and desire to explore their environment to learn.

- **Responding earlier**—Infants respond to stimuli in their environment.
- **Responding later**—They newly notice and respond to novel stimuli in their environment.
- **Exploring earlier**—With their increased mobility, children explore the environment through touch.
- **Exploring later**—Children are familiar with objects in their environment and start exploring different ways to use them.
- **Building earlier**—Children's exploration is more complex and can involve using their hands to manipulate objects or asking questions.

Self-Control of Feelings and Behavior

This measure captures the strategies children use to regulate their feelings and behavior.

- **Responding earlier**—Infants are completely dependent on adults to help comfort them and are not yet able to seek out that comfort on their own.
- **Responding later**—They start to seek adult support and calm from adults' physical comfort when they experience distress.
- **Exploring earlier**—Adults are still key to children's regulation, but they may be calmed simply by the adult's presence or by an object the adult offers them.
- **Exploring later**—Children start to practice regulatory strategies that adults guide them to try.
- **Building earlier**—They start to use regulatory strategies on their own but may still sometimes need adults' guidance.

Cultural and Contextual Considerations

There is no ideal baby. Cultures vary in how they approach learning and self-regulation. Processes like problem solving, decision making, and attention control are shaped by cultural background and practices. For example, a culture that values group harmony might expect an infant or toddler to learn a sleep schedule that works with the family’s schedule and lifestyle. Cultures also differ on how and when they respond to infant cues (e.g., respond immediately, encourage self-soothing) and the traits they value (e.g., calmness, expressiveness).

Glossary of Terms

Location	Concept	Definition
ATL-REG 1: Attention Maintenance—Responding Earlier ATL-REG 4: Curiosity and Initiative in Learning—Responding Earlier	Respond	Children respond to stimuli in their environment to varying degrees over infancy and toddlerhood (e.g., young infants turn their heads toward a sound, older toddlers respond to a question with a short, simple sentence).
ATL-REG 2: Self-Comforting—Definition	Self-soothing	Self-soothing involves strategies that infants and toddlers use to calm themselves (e.g., sucking their thumb, rubbing their cheek on a soft blanket or adult’s clothing).
ATL-REG 2: Self-Comforting—Responding Earlier	Internal stimuli	Internal stimuli (e.g., hunger, sleepiness) come from within the body.
ATL-REG 2: Self-Comforting—Responding Earlier	External stimuli	External stimuli (e.g., sound, someone touching you) come from outside the body.
ATL-REG 5: Self-Control of Feelings and Behavior—Exploring Later	Emotional reaction	Children experience emotional reactions (e.g., sadness) internally; they may display emotional reactions (e.g. crying) externally.
ATL-REG 5: Self-Control of Feelings and Behavior—Exploring Later	Behavioral reaction	Behavioral reactions are the actions that children take in response to an event.

Additional Resources

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University offers many resources¹ about the development of ATL-REG skills in infants and toddlers:

- [What Is Executive Function?](#)
- [Executive Function: Skills for Life and Learning](#)
- Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills With Children From Infancy to Adolescence

The DRDP also provides videos highlighting several ATL-REG skills:

- Attention Maintenance—[Infant Explores Toy and Puzzle](#)
- Imitation—[Sweatshirt and Hugs](#)
- Curiosity and Initiative in Learning—[Infant Explores Toy and Puzzle](#) and [Toddler Plays with Cornstarch](#)

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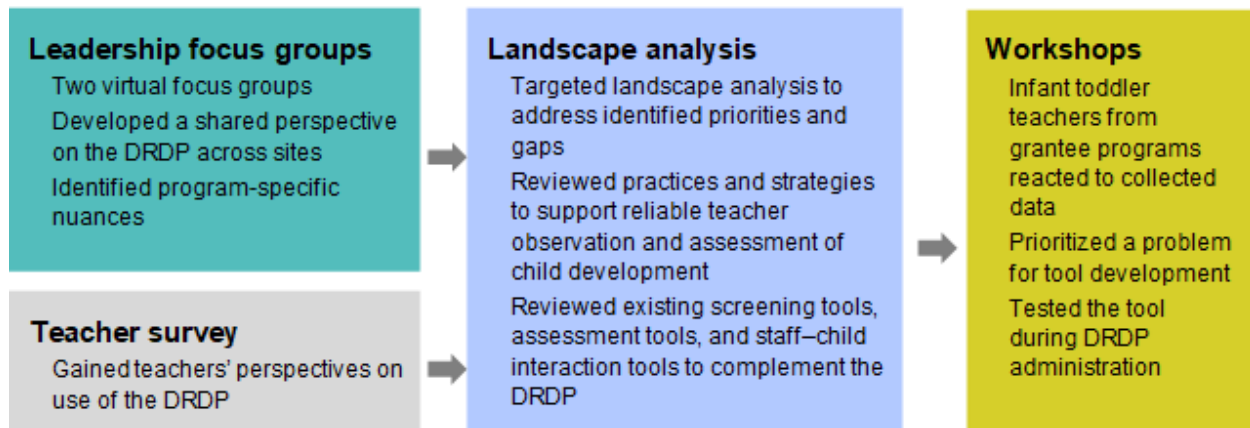
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¹ The term “executive functions” captures a set of skills that help with planning, self-control, and focusing and learning. It encompasses many of the same underlying skills as the ATL-REG domain of the DRDP.

Appendix A: Codesign Process



Appendix B: Tool in Practice

You can use the following exercise to test the tool in your infant toddler program.

Instructions. Please take a few minutes to complete this form after you have observed and rated each infant or toddler.

Name (optional) _____

Age *Infant* *Toddler*

Dual-Language *yes* *no*

Infant Family Service Plan *yes* *no*

1. How did the developmental levels information at the top of the tool help you understand where the child was within the categories of responding, exploring, building, and integrating?

2. How did the big ideas in the last column of the table at the bottom of the tool support your ability to identify examples not included in the DRDP?

3. To what extent do you agree with the statement “Using the tool increased my confidence in observing or rating the infant or toddler”?

Strongly disagree *Disagree* *Neither agree nor disagree* *Agree* *Strongly agree*

4. Would you use this tool again?

yes *no*

5. Would this tool be helpful for other DRDP domains?

yes *no*

Authors

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This project was made possible by the generous support of Tipping Point Community.

Prepared by

James Bell Associates
2000 15th Street North, Suite 100
Arlington, VA 22201
(703) 528-3230
www.jbassoc.com

Tonya Bibbs, Project Director

Disclaimer

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