Assessment in Early Childhood: The Importance of Observation

Minnesota Association for Children’s Mental Health
April 24-26, 2016

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Purpose and Learning Objectives

• **Purpose:**
  - Discuss best practices for the diagnostic assessment of young children from birth to age five-years-old using the Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood (DC:0-3 Revised Edition).

• **Learning Objectives:**
  - Participants will increase their understanding of the intricacies of assessing young children within a community mental health clinic using DC:0-3R.
    - Participants will increase their understanding of implementing the DC:0-3R.
    - Participants will learn the importance of observation.
    - Participants will have a better understanding of the intricacies of assessing young children in the context of relationships and within a developmental framework.
Brief Overview of DC:0-3R

- What is DC:0-3R?
  - Diagnostic classification system designed for the assessment of mental health and developmental difficulties in children birth-five
  - Utilizes a systematic and developmental approach that integrates knowledge and research regarding:
    - Individual differences in infant, toddler, and early childhood development
    - Factors that influence adaptive vs maladaptive developmental patterns
  - First published in 1994; revised 2005 by ZERO TO THREE
  - Developed to *compliment* existing frameworks (e.g. DSM, ICD) due to:
    - Limited inclusion of clinical syndromes or disorders of early childhood
    - Insufficient consideration of developmental features of child disorders included
Brief Overview of DC:0-3R

5 Axial system

**Axis I- Clinical Disorders**

**Axis II- Relationship Classification**
- Parent-Infant Relationship Global Assessment Scale (PIR-GAS)
- Relationship Problems Checklist (RPCL)

**Axis III- Medical & Developmental Disorders and Conditions**

**Axis IV- Psychosocial Stressors**

**Axis V- Emotional and Social Functioning**
- Attention and Regulation
- Forming relationships or mutual engagement
- Intentional two-way communication
- Complex gestures and problem solving
- Use of symbols to express thoughts and feelings
- Connecting symbols logically and abstract thinking
Observation of Child to Inform Axis II and Axis V

Settings:

Clinic  School  Daycare  Home

Relationships:

• Child-Caregiver (Mother, Father, Foster parent, etc.)
• Child-Clinician
• Child-Teacher
• Child-Peers
• Child-Siblings
• Child-Other caretakers (grandparents, daycare providers)

What to observe:

• Child
• Caregiver/Adult
• Interactions
Observation of Child’s Development

Observation Tool – The Ounce Scale

- **Social and Emotional Development**
  - **Personal connections:** How children show they trust you
  - **Feelings about self:** How children express who they are
  - **Relationships with other children:** What children do around other children

- **Communication and Language**
  - **Understanding and communicating:** How children understand and communicate

- **Cognitive Development**
  - **Exploration and problem solving:** How children explore and figure things out

- **Physical Development**
  - **Movement and coordination:** How children move their bodies and use their hands to do things
Joshua

• Background info
  - 36 months old male
  - Lives with mother, father, & 10-month-old brother
  - Mother has a history of depression and anxiety.
  - Mother took Ambient during pregnancy - difficult delivery
  - Fussy baby – colic
  - Healthy child

• Present Functioning and Concerns
  - Aggression
  - Temper tantrums
  - Sleeps in parent’s bed – wakes several times during the night
  - “Very sweet and gentle” with his brother.
  - Child behaves differently for his mother than he does for his father, with mom being more firm.
  - Mom reports he deliberately annoys her
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Social and Emotional Development

Personal Connections: It’s About Trust

Does the child, and how does the child:

4 mos.
• Respond to and engage with familiar adults?
• Notice and react to unfamiliar adults?
• Show a preference for a familiar adult?
• Rely on the presence of familiar adults to try things?
• Seek support from familiar adults?
• Show a need for a familiar adult’s approval and also act independently?
• Reflect attitudes and behaviors of familiar adults?

36 mos.
Act cautiously or show cautious interest with unfamiliar adults?
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Social and Emotional
Personal Connections: It’s About Trust

• At 4 months of age, a child responds to familiar adults and shows awareness of unfamiliar people.
• At 8 month of age, a child engages with familiar adults and notices and reacts to unfamiliar adults.
• At 12 months of age, a child shows preference for familiar adults and reacts to unfamiliar adults.
• At 18 months of age, a child relies on the presence of familiar adults to try things and shows awareness of unfamiliar adults.
• At 24 months of age, a child seeks support of familiar adults to try things and acts cautiously around unfamiliar adults.
• At 30 months of age, a child shows need for familiar adults approval and also acts independently. The child also shows cautious interests in unfamiliar adults.
• At 36 months of age, a child reflects attitudes and behaviors of familiar adults. The child also shows cautious interest in new people.
Joshua Observation #1

Peaches
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Social and Emotional Development

Feelings About Self: Learning About Me

Does the child, and how does the child:

- Express comfort and discomfort; enjoyment and unhappiness?
- Express other feelings?
- Show preferences, likes and dislikes?
- Express own ideas, interests, and feelings?
- Show emerging sense of self?
- Show comfort with independence, competence, and expressing feelings?
- Express feelings through language and pretend play?
- Calm self?
- Try to manage own behavior in different situations and in different ways?
- Show awareness of social skills when expressing needs and wants?

4 mos.

36 mos.
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Social and Emotional Development

Feelings About Self: Learning About Me

- At 4 months of age, a child expresses feelings and calms self.
- At 8 months of age, a child expresses feelings and is learning to cope with familiar and unfamiliar situations.
- At 12 months of age, a child shows likes and dislikes and tries to manage own behavior in different situations.
- At 18 months of age, a child shows preferences, likes and dislikes. A child also tries to manage own behavior.
- At 24 months of age, a child expresses own ideas, interests, and feelings. A child also tries to manage own behavior.
- At 30 months of age, a child shows emerging sense of self and growing ability to manage own behavior in different ways. A child also expresses feelings through language and pretend play.
- At 36 months of age, a child shows comfort with independence, competence, and expressing feelings, demonstrates emerging ability to manage own behavior, and shows awareness of social skills when expressing wants and needs.
Joshua Observation #2

Naptime
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Social and Emotional Development

**Relationships with Other Children: Child to Child**

Does the child, and how does the child:

**4 mos.**
- Show or demonstrate awareness of other children?
- Show awareness of other children’s feelings?
- Watch other children?
- Play beside other children?
- Play cooperatively with other children?
- Interact with other children?

**36 mos.**
- Respond to other children’s feelings?
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Social and Emotional Development

Relationships with Other Children: Child to Child

- At 4 months of age, a child shows awareness of other children.
- At 8 months of age, a child shows awareness of other children.
- At 12 months of age, a child demonstrates awareness of other children.
- At 18 months of age, a child interacts with other child and shows awareness of other children’s feelings.
- At 24 months of age, a child watches and plays briefly with other children and shows awareness of other children’s feelings.
- At 30 months of age, a child plays by other children and responds to other children’s feelings.
- At 36 months of age, a child shows capacity to play cooperatively with other children and responds to other children’s feelings.
Joshua Observation #3

Play
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Communication and Language

**Understanding and Communicating: Child Talk**

Does the child, and how does the child:

4 mos.
- **Respond to sights and sounds?**
- **Show an understanding of gestures and words?**
- **Show he/she is paying attention?**
- **Use sounds and body movements to communicate?**
- **Use consistent sounds, verbal expressions, and gestures to communicate?**
- **Follow simple directions and suggestions consistently?**
- **Use a growing number of words?**
- **Put several words together?**
- **Understand questions?**
- **Understand ideas and sequences of stories?**
- **Use words to express thoughts and ideas?**
- **Participate in conversation?**

36 mos.
Observation - The Ounce Scale

Communication and Language

Understanding and Communicating: Child Talk

- At 4 months of age, a child responds to sights and sounds and uses sounds and movements to communicate.
- At 8 months of age, a child responds to frequently heard sounds and words, uses a variety of sounds and motions to communicate.
- At 12 months of age, a child shows understanding of gestures and words, uses consistent sounds, verbal expressions, and gestures to communicate.
- At 18 months of age, a child shows increased understanding of words and gestures and uses consistent sounds, gestures, and some words to communicate.
- At 24 months of age, a child follows simple directions and suggestions consistently, uses a growing number of words and puts several words together, pays attention to and tries to participate in conversations.
- At 30 months of age, a child understands questions, simple directions, beginning concepts, and the ideas and sequences of stories, uses words and some conventions of speech to express thoughts and ideas, and participates in conversations.
- At 36 months of age, a child understands questions, some abstract concepts, and simple directions, uses some conventions of speech when expressing thoughts and ideas, and commenting on observations and participates in conversations.
Joshua Observation #4

Play in Car

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Observation - The Ounce Scale
Cognitive Development

**Exploration and Problem Solving: Child Discoveries**

Does the child, and how does the child:

**4 mos.**
- Pay attention to what is happening in the environment?
- Make things happen unexpectedly?
- Display short-term memory?
- Shows understanding of things in the environment during exploration?
- Make expected things happen?
- Use toys and other objects with a purpose?
- Explore the environment and learn how things work?
- Show increasing memory for details and routines?
- Expect specific results when playing with toys and other objects?
- Use reasoning skills and imagination when planning ways to make things happen?

**36 mos.**
- Show ability to figure things out?

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Observation - The Ounce Scale
Cognitive Development

**Exploration and Problem Solving: Child Discoveries**

- At 4 months of age, a child pays attention to what is happening in the environment and makes things happen.
- At 8 months of age, a child attends to what is happening in the environment, displays short-term memory, and makes things happen.
- At 12 months of age, a child shows understanding of things in the environment during exploration, demonstrates memory, and makes expected things happen.
- At 18 months of age, a child gains new understanding while exploring the environment, shows increased memory skills, and uses toys and other objects with a purpose.
- At 24 months of age, a child explores the environment and learns how things work, shows increasing memory for details and routines, and expects specific results when playing with toys and other objects.
- At 30 months of age, a child explores new ways to do things and shows beginning understanding of concepts of color, size, matching, and weight, uses reasoning skills and imagination when planning ways to make things happen, and begins to understand consequences when re-creating events and following familiar routines.
- At 36 months of age, a child explores and understands in more detailed and abstract ways, plans before taking action, and shows ability to figure things out.
Joshua Observation #5

Reminder of Rule
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Physical Development

Movement and Coordination: Children in Motion

Does the child, and how does the child:

4 mos.
- Have control of head and body?
- Reach toward things that capture their attention?
- Hold things briefly before they drop from fingers?
- Change body positions?
- Uses both hands with intention and purpose?
- Move from place to place?
- Coordinate eyes with hands while holding and exploring objects?
- Move with coordination and balance?
- Complete or participate in self-help activities?
- Use fingers, hands, and eyes to engage in a variety of activities?
- Participate in many play activities and uses new movement skills?

36 mos.
- Use hands with increasing control and precision?
Observation - The Ounce Scale
Physical Development

Movement and Coordination: Children in Motion

- At 4 months of age, a child gains control of head and body, reaches toward things, and holds on to things.
- At 8 month of age, a child changes body positions and uses both hands with intention and purpose.
- At 12 months of age, a child changes position and begins to move from place to place and coordinates eyes with hands while hold and exploring objects.
- At 18 months of age, a child moves from place to place, uses hands to engage in activities and social games, and begins to participate in self-help activities.
- At 24 months of age, a child shows increasing coordination and balance, and combines actions to participate in play activities, uses hands and eyes to accomplish a variety of tasks, and participates in self-help activities.
- At 30 months of age, a child shows coordination skills while moving around and engaging in play activities, demonstrates eye-hand coordination while manipulating and exploring object, and participates in self-help activities.
- At 36 months of age, a child demonstrates increased body control and combines several movements when participating in play activities, uses fingers, hands, and eyes to engage in a variety of activities, and accomplishes many self-help activities.
Observations of Joshua

• **Social and Emotional Development**
  - **Personal connections**: How children show they trust you
  - **Feelings about self**: How children express who they are
  - **Relationships with other children**: What children do around other children

• **Communication and Language**
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• **Joshua and his caregiver**
Observations in a DC:0-3R Framework

• Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning
  • Rating the child’s emotional functioning in the context of interaction with important caregivers and in relation to expectable patterns of development in the earliest years.

• Axis II: Relationship Classification
  • Rating the quality of child-parent relationship
### Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

DC: 0-3R Diagnostic Guidelines - Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

Observe the quality of the infant or young child’s play with each of the significant people in his or her life then choose the rating that best fits the child’s functioning with respect to each of the capacities listed below in interaction with each caregiver. Primary caregivers may be biological, foster, and adoptive parent(s), as well as grandparents, members of the extended family, and caregivers outside the family.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional and Social Functioning Capacities</th>
<th>Functioning Rating (1-6, n/a) for Each Caregiver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attention and regulation</strong> [p 63] [typically observable between birth to 3 months]</td>
<td>A    B    C    D    E    F    G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From: Does the infant notice and attend to what is going on in the world through all the senses?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To: Does the infant stay sufficiently regulated to attend and interact, without over- or under-reacting to external or internal stimuli?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Forming relationships/mutual engagement** [p 63] [typically observable between 3 and 6 months] | A    B    C    D    E    F    G                |
| From: Does the infant develop a relationship with an emotionally available caregiver for soothing, security, and pleasure? |
| To: Is the child able to experience the full range of positive and negative emotions while remaining engaged in a relationship? |

| **Intentional two-way communication** [p 63] [typically observable between 4 to 10 months]       | A    B    C    D    E    F    G                |
| From: Does the infant use simple gestures, including purposeful demonstrations of affect, to start reciprocal “conversations”? |
| To: Does the young child use a more complex sequence of gestures? |

| **Complex gestures and problem solving** [p 63] [typically observable between 10 and 18 months]   | A    B    C    D    E    F    G                |
| From: Has the toddler learned how to use emerging motor skills and language to get what he needs or wants? |
| To: Does the young child use words as well as gestures for communication and problem solving? |

| **Use of symbols to express thoughts and feelings** [p 63] [typically observable between 18 and 30 months] | A    B    C    D    E    F    G                |
| From: Does the child begin to play and language to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings through symbols? |
| To: Does the child project her own feelings onto the characters and actions of her imaginative play? |

| **Connecting symbols logically; abstract thinking** [p 63] [typically observable between 30 and 48 months] | A    B    C    D    E    F    G                |
| From: Does the child connect and elaborate sequences of ideas logically and use logically interconnected ideas in conversation? |
| To: Does the child understand abstract concepts, reflect on feelings, and articulate lessons that he has learned from an experience? |

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Functioning Rating for Each Capacity</th>
<th>Caregiver List</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number(s) in parentheses is the source page number(s) in the manual</strong></td>
<td>Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rating</strong></td>
<td>A    B    C    D    E    F    G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Age appropriate under all conditions and with full range of affects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age inappropriate but vulnerable to stress or constricted range of affect or both</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Immature; has the capacity but not at an age appropriate level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Functions inconsistently unless special structure or sensorimotor support is available</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Barely evidences this capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Has not achieved this level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a Not applicable. Child is below the age level typically expected to have achieved.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

**ATTENTION & REGULATION**

The infant notices and attends to what is going on in the world through all the senses—by looking, listening, touching, and moving. The infant can stay sufficiently regulated to attend and interact, without over- or underreacting to external or internal stimuli. As the child achieves higher levels of functioning over time, her capacity to maintain a long, contiguous flow of interactions provides evidence of her capacity for age-appropriate attention and regulation.

Typically observable between: 0-3 MOS

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<tr>
<th>FUNCTIONING RATING</th>
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## Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMING RELATIONSHIPS/MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT</th>
<th>Typically observable between:</th>
<th>Functional Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The infant develops a relationship with an emotionally available caregiver for soothing, security, and pleasure. As development proceeds, with support from the caregiving environment, the child becomes able to experience the full range of positive and negative emotions while remaining engaged in relationship.</td>
<td>3-6 MOS</td>
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### Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

**INTENTIONAL TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION**

| The infant uses gestures, including purposeful demonstrations of affect, to start reciprocal “conversations.” Simple gestures, such as reaching to be picked up or pointing to an object of interest, become a more complex sequences of gestures during the second year. Two-way communication becomes actual conversation as the child develops verbal language. |
|---|---|
| Typically observable between: | 4-10 MOS |
| Functional Rating | |

**FUNCTIONING RATING**

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# Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

## Complex Gestures and Problem Solving

The toddler learns how to use emerging motor skills and language to get what they need or want—this is, to solve problems. Simple gestures are replaced by complex sequences of gestures and actions (e.g., leading a parent to a desired object). As the child develops language, he uses words as well as gestures for communication and problem solving.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPLEX GESTURES AND PROBLEM SOLVING</th>
<th>Typically observable between:</th>
<th>Functional Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10-18 MOS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

## Functioning Rating

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## Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

### USE OF SYMBOLS TO EXPRESS THOUGHTS/FEELINGS

Using imaginative play and language, the child begins to express thoughts, ideas, and feelings through symbols. A child can communicate what she imagines through role-play, dress-up, and play with dolls and action figures. Imaginative play may represent experiences from real life, as well as themes the child has encountered in stories, books, videos, and television. In her play scenarios, the child projects her own feelings onto the characters and action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typically observable between:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-30 MOS</td>
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### CONNECTING SYMBOLS

**LOGICALLY/ABSTRACT THINKING**

The child can connect and elaborate sequences of ideas logically. He uses logically interconnected ideas in conversations about daily events and imaginative stories. The narratives of children who function at this level typically have a beginning, middle, and end. They include characters with clear motives and consequences of action that can be anticipated. The child is able to understand abstract concepts, reflect on feelings, and articulate lessons that he has learned from an experience.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Typically observable between:</th>
<th>Functional Rating</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30-48 MOS</td>
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Axis V: Emotional and Social Functioning

Joshua is ....
Axis II: Relationship Classification

- The **Parent-Infant Relationships Global Assessment Scale (PIR-GAS)** ratings based on:
  
  1. Overall functional level of both the child and the parent
     - Enjoyable/satisfying → Strained → Unsatisfying/chronic chaos
  2. Level of distress in both the child and the parent
     - Easy → Walking on egg shells → Constant stress
  3. Adaptive flexibility of both the child and the parent
     - Flexible/reciprocal → Support required → Rigid/Inflexible
  4. Level of conflict and resolution between the child and the parent
     - Reciprocal/warm → Expecting distress → Most interactions are conflict
  5. Effect of the quality of the relationship on the child’s developmental progress
     - Promotes growth → Temporary interruption → Barrier to development
DC: 0-3R Diagnostic Guidelines – Axis II: Relationship Classification

Assess the relationship between primary caregiver(s) and the infant or young child. Primary caregivers may be biological, foster, and adoptive parent(s), as well as grandparents, members of the extended family, and caregivers outside the family. Consider multiple aspects of the relationship dynamic including the child and parent’s overall functional level, level of distress, adaptive flexibility, and level of conflict and resolution between both the child and parent and the effect of the quality of the relationship on the child’s developmental progress. A relationship disorder is specific to a relationship and symptoms may derive from conditions within the infant, from within the caregiver, from the unique “fit” between the infant and caregiver, from the larger social context or from a combination of these factors. When relationship difficulties are apparent, assess the intensity, frequency, and duration of the difficulties.

Is the relationship characterized by:
• mutual enjoyment without significant stress for each partner
• pattern that protects and promotes the developmental progress of both partners

Yes

The relationship is

- 91-100 Well Adapted [p 43]
- 81-90 Adapted [p 43]

Adapted

No

Axis II Diagnosis

No Diagnosis

* * * * * Remember to complete the Relationship Problems Checklist [p 46] * * * * *

Is the relationship:
• functioning less than optimally,
• pattern transient, or
• developmental progress cannot proceed, but may be temporarily interrupted

Yes

The relationship has

- 71-80 Perturbed [p 43]
- 61-70 Significantly Perturbed [p 44]
- 51-60 Distressed [p 44]
- 41-50 Disturbed [p 44]

Features of a Disorder

No

Disordered

Is the relationship marked by:
• rigidly maladaptive interactions,
• distress in one or both partners,
• developmental progress of the child is influenced adversely,
• documented neglect or abuse that affects child’s physical and emotional development

Yes

The relationship is

- 31-40 Disordered [p 44]
- 21-30 Severely Disordered [p 44]
- 11-20 Grossly Impaired [p 45]
- 1-10 Documented Maltreatment [p 45]

Number(s) in parentheses is the source page number(s) in the manual.

[Number(s) in parentheses is the source page number(s) in the manual.]


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Axis II: Relationship Classification

Relationship Quality:

• Overinvolved: parent manifests over-involvement both physically and/or psychologically
• Underinvolved: parent shows only sporadic, infrequent involvement or connectedness
• Anxious/Tense: tense and constricted interactions with little enjoyment/mutuality
• Angry/Hostile: interactions are harsh and abrupt, often lacking in emotional reciprocity
• Verbally Abusive: severe abusive emotional content, unclear boundaries, and over-control by the parent.
• Physically Abusive: severe physical abuse, unclear boundaries, and over-control by the parent.
• Sexually Abusive: a lack of regard for physical boundaries and extreme sexualized intrusiveness.
Axis II: Relationship Classification

Joshua and his caregiver:

- Parent-Infant Relationship Global Assessment Scale (PIR-GAS)

- Quality of their relationship
Resources

• Information and Training:
  • DHS – [http://mn.gov/dhs](http://mn.gov/dhs)
  • Follow these links: People We Serve – Children and Families – Health Care – Children’s Mental Health – Children’s Mental Health Partners and Providers – Training – early Childhood Mental Health – DC:0-3R
  • Introduction to DC:0-3 & Advanced Case Studies

Minnesota Department of Health - Developmental and Social–Emotional Screening of Young Children (0–6 years of age) in Minnesota

Resources

• MN Department of Health - Early Intervention System
  http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/cfh/program/cyshn/earlyintro.cfm

• MN Help Me Grow – Developmental Milestones
  http://helpmegrowmn.org/HMG/index.htm

• Developmental Expectations
  http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/
Resources

• ZERO TO THREE
  • http://www.zerotothree.org/

• DC:0-5
  • Include disorders for children birth to 5.
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