Child development assessment tools in low-income and middle-income countries: how can we use them more appropriately?

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ABSTRACT

Global emphasis has shifted beyond reducing child survival rates to improving health and developmental trajectories in childhood. Optimum early childhood experience is believed to allow children to benefit fully from educational opportunities resulting in improved human capital. Investment in early childhood initiatives in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs) is increasing. These initiatives use early childhood developmental assessment tools (CDATs) as outcome measures. CDATs are also key measures in the evaluation of programmatic health initiatives in LMICs, influencing public health policy. Interpretation of CDAT outcomes requires understanding of their structure and psychometric properties. This article reviews the structure and main methods of CDAT development with specific considerations when applied in LMICs.

WHAT IS A CHILD DEVELOPMENTAL ASSESSMENT TOOL, WHAT DO THEY MEASURE AND HOW ARE THEY ADMINISTERED?

Early childhood is a period of rapid physical growth during which an individual acquires a complex set of skills and functional competencies that should facilitate achievement of their potential in life. Weight and height charts were developed on the premise that children from similar ethnic backgrounds follow similar growth trajectories. In a comparable fashion, acquisition of skills during early childhood is also expected to follow a set trajectory. For growth and development we know that it is best to intervene promptly in order to maintain a healthy trajectory.

US legislative changes incorporated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 specify the use of standardised CDATs to evaluate the following developmental domains; cognitive, language, motor, adaptive and socioemotional, in order to guide diagnostic investigations and interventions (table 1). Each domain of development is assessed by the child’s ability to carry out a series of increasingly complex activities that are thought to reflect the expected level of development at a particular age. The developmental domains evaluated by CDAT do not function as discrete entities but influence each other—for example, to successfully complete a jigsaw puzzle requires a combination of cognitive and fine motor skills, and sufficient understanding of language to process instructions.

Methods to assess child development may include: (A) direct assessment of standardised activities by a trained assessor in a clinical environment, (B) verbal reporting/completion of a questionnaire about the child’s abilities by parents or teachers and (C) unstructured observation by a trained assessor in an environment familiar to the child (eg, home/school). Direct testing in an unfamiliar environment by an unfamiliar adult may restrict a child’s engagement and participation in the assessment. Parental reporting, on the other hand, may be affected by recall bias. Unstructured observation can be difficult to reproduce and interpret. An ideal CDAT would include aspects of all three methods, but with limited financial resources, often one method is chosen.

TYPES OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS—SCREENING VERSUS FORMAL ASSESSMENT?

Screening tools are administered quickly, using a limited sample of items representing a domain and rely on predetermined cut-off points. Screening tools are designed to identify children who may...
have impairment and require a comprehensive assessment. However, screening tools have poor utility in assessing subtle delays that may have a significant impact on subsequent development. Screening tools are beneficial when used within the context of a development surveillance programme, where there are appropriate norms and known applicability in specific subgroups.15

Most formal tools require specialised specific training of assessors. They allow administration of items above or below the age bracket of the child thus allowing the child’s strengths and weaknesses to be categorised more accurately. Formal assessments can be administered repeatedly to evaluate changes over time and/or following an intervention.

**IS THE TOOL MEASURING WHAT IT IS SUPPOSED TO—VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY?**

Developmental domains are a theoretical concept, typically referred to as ‘constructs’ in the psychometric literature. These cannot be directly measured but are inferred through the child’s performance on a number of observed variables (test items). Reliability is the variability of scores obtained by an individual if repeatedly given the same test. There are widely cited levels of acceptable reliability for testing,16 however the result should be interpreted in context. For example, retest reliability can be influenced by developmental maturation over the time interval, or training by the caregiver following mistakes seen in the first assessment.17 Validity is the accuracy of the score representing the construct of interest.8 In addition, screening tools are evaluated for sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value and negative predictive value. Reliability and validity of CDAT can be evaluated through several methods, summarised in table 2.

**HOW TO DETERMINE A CHILD’S PERFORMANCE ON THE CDAT—THE REFERENCE POPULATION**

All assessment tools have a threshold that a child must achieve for the assessor to be confident that there are no current developmental concerns. There are two main ways of setting this threshold, norm referencing and criterion referencing. A norm-referenced test is usually administered in a standardised manner and the individual child’s scores in each domain are compared with scores from a large representative sample of children of the same age and sex (normative data). Standard scores allow comparison between scales evaluating the same domain and monitoring of individuals at different ages. By contrast, criterion-referenced tests assess whether a child has acquired a particular skill by a certain age, according to a specific curriculum. Administration may not be standardised, since individual children sometimes require additional instructions or physical aids to complete a particular task but are able to complete the specified tests. Criterion-referenced tests are often used in screening procedures, for example assessment of reading skills at school entry, or evaluation of an intervention such as a programme of physical therapy. In some cases criterion-based tests have been standardised on large representative populations.

There are concerns that the rapidly changing nature of society means that normative data become outdated very quickly. To counter this, inclusion of a control group is now considered crucial for research studies, even when the normative population is contemporaneous and comes from the same linguistic and cultural background as the study population.

**WHEN TO ASSESS DEVELOPMENT, WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE FUTURE—PREDICTIVE VALIDITY?**

CDAT will only give a snapshot of the child at that time point. Traits that have not yet evolved in early childhood clearly cannot be assessed until such time as they might reasonably be expected to be present, and yet impairment within these characteristics may impact subsequent development significantly.18

After an assessment, it is important to know the predictive validity of the CDAT score, whether normal or abnormal. Correlations between early childhood performance and school abilities in normal children are variable.19 Children with moderate developmental delay, despite the same initial difficulties, have great variability in developmental trajectories, with some children catching up while others exhibit evolving difficulties with age.20 Aspects of early development may be predictive of later academic ability. Preschool English language acquisition of vocabulary, grammar and descriptive phrasing predicted school reading ability in a prospective longitudinal US study.20a Research in normal infants suggests that acquisition of efficient

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**Table 1 Developmental domains**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developmental domains and subdomains</th>
<th>Description of domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive40</td>
<td>Strategies and processes children develop to interpret and respond to their environment and experiences including; memory (ability to encode, retain and recall information over time) attention (the ability to choose what to focus on for a sustained period), that influence memory language skills which as the brain develops children acquire and refine language skills. Newborn explores the world by mouthing objects; and later explores the world by imitating actions, manipulating objects and planning two-step strategies to get what he wants. From 2 years, children increase their use of language and start make-believe play. In children aged 3–5 years there is rapid development in information processing (the speed and fluency of response following stimuli), cognitive flexibility (the ability to make and change strategies as required, and to simultaneously process multiple stimuli) and goal setting (the ability to plan strategies in a coherent and efficient order).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language41</td>
<td>Understanding of the spoken word and sentence structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td>Spoken vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Ability to manipulate small objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor42</td>
<td>Ability to walk, run and coordinate complex physical activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine motor</td>
<td>The ability to identify and understand one’s own feelings and to accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others. Ability to regulate one’s own behaviour, to develop empathy for others, and to establish and maintain relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross motor</td>
<td>Collection of conceptual, social and practical skills that have been learned by people in order to function in their everyday lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and emotional42 43</td>
<td>Social and emotional skills, the ability to identify and understand one’s own feelings and to accurately read and comprehend emotional states in others. Ability to regulate one’s own behaviour, to develop empathy for others, and to establish and maintain relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive behaviour44</td>
<td>Adaptive behaviour refers to the ability to plan strategies in a coherent and efficient order.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The aim of the application. Rie et al evaluated the impact of HIV on neurodevelopment of children in Kinshasa, Congo. The researchers deliberately used a direct translation of a western CDAT without cultural adaptation to compare between groups in the same setting and then compare between past and future studies in other settings. This method does not ensure that the tool is measuring the same underlying ability in all settings. Holding et al27, aimed to facilitate comparisons between different cultural groups in differing countries and needed to measure the same underlying ability in all settings. This was done by cultural modification of a western tool. The Kilifi Developmental Checklist (KDC) was also based on items from a range of CDATs. The items were chosen based on ease of observing and arithmetic scores at school age. Overall, predictive power in comparative US research was similar.24

There is still a lack of evidence as to whether the interpretation of group differences in scores due to an intervention or exposure in infancy should be interpreted as predicting anything in terms of later intelligence.25

**APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES OF CDAT DEVELOPMENT IN LMICS**

Currently, only a few CDATs are available in LMICs and most are used in research settings. These CDATs typically follow one of the following formats: (A) a standard western CDAT with no adaptations; (B) a western CDAT translated (linguistic equivalence) and/or adapted for the local cultural environment (cultural equivalence); (C) an amalgamation of a number of translated and/or adapted items from several different western CDATs; or (D) a locally developed, culturally specific CDAT consisting of original items designed to be relevant to the population of interest.25

The format of CDAT adaptation depends on

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**Table 2 Basic psychometric properties used to evaluate child development assessment tools (CDATs)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relevance/Importance</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal consistency</td>
<td>Evaluates the similarity of test items assessed in one domain. One measure is split-half reliability, which compares the scores on two halves of a test in a single domain. High internal consistency suggests that some items are too similar, so no additional information is gained from assessing them. Low internal consistency suggests the items may not be assessing the same domain. There may be systematic errors, specific to a particular group of assessors, and this parameter may not be generalisable when the tool is used by a different group of assessors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interobserver</td>
<td>Evaluates variability between different assessors on the same subject. Commonly evaluated by the same assessor scoring video recordings of their own assessments. This is not essential unless there is low interobserver reliability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intraobserver</td>
<td>Evaluates variability within a single assessor on a single subject. Usually ‘gold standard’ tests are not available so the comparison is typically against another recognised test regularly used in the same population and thought to measure the same domain. Scores from two independent tests (eg, one using report method the other a direct test) of one domain should correlate where neither test is considered a ‘gold standard’. To ensure the test is not overlapping with constructs not of interest, the scores evaluating different constructs should poorly correlate, for example, test scores on ‘fine motor’ should correlate poorly with ‘social emotional’. Large numbers of assessments are required to evaluate this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test-retest</td>
<td>Evaluates variability within the subject (influenced by random factors such as familiarity with items and mood). Difficult to interpret in early childhood when changes in development occur over a short time. Usually the repeat assessment should be carried out within 2 weeks of the first test. Subjective measure that cannot be used in isolation to evaluate validity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Experts in the field make consensus agreement on whether the individual item and the range of items adequately sample and represent the domain of interest. Usually ‘gold standard’ tests are not available so the comparison is typically against another recognised test regularly used in the same population and thought to measure the same domain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion</td>
<td>Ideally assessed by comparison to an established ‘gold standard’ test assessing the same construct. To ensure the test is not overlapping with constructs not of interest, the scores evaluating different constructs should poorly correlate, for example, test scores on ‘fine motor’ should correlate poorly with ‘social emotional’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discriminant/convergent</td>
<td>Evaluates expected positive and negative correlations between scores in different domains or between different tests of the same or differing underlying construct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construct</td>
<td>Statistical evaluation to see whether values of observed data fit a theoretical model of the constructs (confirmatory) or to explore a possible model of the ‘underlying traits’ being measured.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3  Examples of CDATs (children <5 years) used in LMIC countries sourced from published literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool and country</th>
<th>Type of tool and item selection</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Validity</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kilifi Developmental Checklist (KDC) Kenya</strong>&lt;sup&gt;48&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Mixture of items from government local screening test, Western tools and LMIC tools developed elsewhere</td>
<td>Excellent*</td>
<td>Items range from poor to good correlation with parental report†</td>
<td>Aimed to be used by low-skilled workers. Identified that secondary school level education was minimal for an assessor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kilifi Developmental Inventory (KDI) Kenya</strong>&lt;sup&gt;40&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Assessment based on KDC with additional items from western tools</td>
<td>Excellent*</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>Designed to monitor changes over time. Involved parental focus groups so procedures acceptable to community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developmental Milestone Checklist Kenya</strong>&lt;sup&gt;46&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>Good*</td>
<td>Very good correlation with KDI†</td>
<td>Structured interview. Future plans to develop cut-offs using clinical samples. Can be administered by those with little training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guide to monitoring child development. Turkey</strong>&lt;sup&gt;46&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>Good*</td>
<td>Excellent agreement with comprehensive evaluation§</td>
<td>Brief, open-ended precoded interview with parent. No specific cognitive domain questions. May not be appropriate for monitoring ‘at-risk’ populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rapid neurodevelopmental assessment RNA 0–2 years Bangladesh</strong>&lt;sup&gt;47&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>Excellent§</td>
<td>Significant differences in scores in children with neurodevelopment impairment</td>
<td>Used in a small high-risk population and identified infants requiring intervention for retinopathy of prematurity. RNA identified additional problems such as impairments in vision and hearing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rapid neurodevelopmental assessment. RNA 2–5 years Bangladesh</strong>&lt;sup&gt;48&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>Excellent§</td>
<td>Sensitivity 80–90% Specificity 60–78%</td>
<td>Comparison with ‘gold-standard’ tests already developed for Bangladesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malawi Developmental Assessment Tool. Malawi</strong>&lt;sup&gt;49&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>Excellent*</td>
<td>Sensitivity 97% Specificity 82%</td>
<td>Good strategy to devise socioemotional items.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Based on internal consistency reliability and/or test–retest reliability.†Parental report correlation.‡Specificity.§Sensitivity and specificity.§Established using clinical samples.§Sensitivity and specificity.§Estimates for different age groups.†Parental report correlation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool and country</th>
<th>Type of tool and item selection (translation±adaptation)</th>
<th>Method of assessment Age</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Validity</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTERGROWTH-21st Neurodevelopment Assessment&lt;sup&gt;29&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Screening</td>
<td>Items from selection of Western and LMIC tools</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Project specific criteria to create a tool for use in children from middle-class and upper class families across low-income, middle-income and high-income settings, carried out by non-specialists. Also evaluates vision, hearing and sleep-wake cycle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic approach to assess nutritional influences, Indonesia&lt;sup&gt;17&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Items from selection of Western tools</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Clear hypothesis driven tool creation. May not be suitable as a general developmental assessment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interpretation of statistical tests are listed below.<sup>16 52</sup> These need to be interpreted in context of application and population.<sup>17 53</sup> 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of κ, Levels†, ρ†, intraclass‡ correlation and α coefficients*.</th>
<th>Level of proposed agreement¶ (%)</th>
<th>Levels of clinical or practical significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;0.4</td>
<td>&lt;70%</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4–0.59</td>
<td>70–79</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.60–0.74</td>
<td>80–89</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.75–1.00</td>
<td>90–100</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CDAT, child development assessment tool; LMICs, low-income and middle-income countries.
developed the testing led to two more draft versions of the Malawi alongside original items. An iterative process of adaption and when compared in terms of their psychometric properties areas of development. This shift to ensure the CDAT can in a shift to a more hypothesis-driven, focused testing of speci- effects of supplementation of a nutritional de...

... that the new items did not perform well when compared in terms of their psychometric properties alongside original items. An iterative process of adaption and testing led to two more draft versions of the Malawi Developmental Assessment Tool before the team successfully developed the final version.

Table 3 presents examples of the basic structure and psychometric properties of several CDATs developed for LMICs.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT FROM CDATs IN LMICS: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN LMICS

Debate on the influence of nurture versus nature continues, although an increasing body of opinion now considers the early perinatal environment to be as important in determining cogni-... childhood community-based stimulation interventions that can have long-lasting benefits on cognitive, socioemotional well-being despite adverse socioeconomic environments. CDAT research will continue to inform the agenda for early interven-... of the population of interest? 3. Is the CDAT sensitive enough in the setting required to identify the changes expected for the risk factor or intervention? 4. Are the number of evaluations and duration of follow-up suitable for evaluating the outcome of interest? 5. In research studies, is there a suitable control group and have potential influences been considered?

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Childhood developmental outcomes are firmly on the current global health agenda particularly now that it is time to set the new millennium developmental goals. However the relationship between future employability, quality of life measures and performance on a CDAT before the age of 5 years, is not known. Longitudinal research is needed to evaluate these relationships. In LMICs where early intervention support is limited, robust CDAT construction within culturally acceptable early child development programmes will help explore the relationship with later outcomes and promote the factors which protect against the neurocognitive detrimental effects of adversities faced by children in LMICs.

QUICK CHECKLIST FOR APPRAISING A CDAT

1. Does the CDAT adequately measure all aspects of the domain(s) theoretically affected by a risk factor or intervention? 2. Has the CDAT been shown to be reliable and valid in the population of interest? 3. Is the CDAT sensitive enough in the setting required to identify the changes expected for the risk factor or intervention? 4. Are the number of evaluations and duration of follow-up suitable for evaluating the outcome of interest? 5. In research studies, is there a suitable control group and have potential influences been considered?

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