

**Virtual Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment-2: Responding to COVID-19**

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## Re-envisioning Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessments

Online learning formats have been increasing in popularity for years. COVID-19, has pushed that trend forward and made it a necessity. A particular challenge has arisen for school/district-based evaluation teams required to identify children with developmental delays and disabilities without being able to see children face-to-face. Virtual assessments are a promising alternative. This article takes a look at how assessment teams used the Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment (TPBA) in Colorado to implement a virtual version of this process. This article summarizes the guidance that teams provided to transition to virtual assessments. After six weeks of implementation, six teams engaged in a virtual feedback session to discuss the usefulness, strengths, and concerns about the new process. The findings from those teams will be discussed below.

Across the country, many providers use *Transdisciplinary Play-based Assessment-2 (TPBA2)* (Linder, 2008). In brief, *TPBA2* is an authentic assessment that obtains developmental information from multiple sources, including 1) family and other caregivers; 2) classroom or childcare observation; and 3) observation of play in a play session. The *TPBA2* process involves family members in an integral way, before, during and after the assessment, regardless of where the assessment is done. Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) directs Early Intervention (EI) services and providers to conduct their assessments in the natural environment, which may be in the family's home or a child care center with a multidisciplinary Child Find team. Section 619 of Part B of IDEA directs preschool special education and assessment teams to conduct their assessments in a school or center. COVID-19 brought a sudden stop to these assessments and a reconsideration of how to approach the identification

of young children needing special education services. The key question: How can we implement a valid *TPBA2* without direct contact with the child and family?

First, let's first summarize the traditional *TPBA2* process to understand how it was modified.

TPBA2 steps and process:

- 1) Families provide *preliminary information* about the child and family health history, the routines of the day, and the family's perspective about the child's development.
- 2) The team examines this information in a meeting to *plan* the play session.
- 3) The assessment team observes the child in a *play session* with the family and a play facilitator for approximately an hour. A play facilitator engages the child and family in a variety of types of play and elicits a broad range of skills. A family facilitator observes and talks with the parent, when the parent is not directly playing with the child. The family facilitator elicits information about how the child's typically plays, provides information about what the play facilitator is doing and why, and elicits interpretation of language and behavior. Other team members take notes on the child's observed behaviors and strategies used to support the child in obtaining higher level skills or better quality of performance. The assessment is often video recorded for later review.
- 4) A *debriefing* is held with the family to identify strengths, next steps, and some ideas for home.
- 5) During a *team discussion* the assessment team uses the *TPBA2* Observation Guidelines and Age Tables to determine the child's level of functioning, strengths, developmental patterns, and needs, as well as what strategies to support the child's learning.

The advantages of the *TPBA2* process over traditional standardized assessments are many and address issues identified as best practices in assessment, such as:

- Families are a meaningful part of the team.
- The assessment is holistic, covering all developmental domains in an integrated way.
- Observing and documenting the child's natural play and interactions is an authentic assessment method.
- Discussion of assessment results is transdisciplinary, looking for patterns that cross disciplines.
- Results and findings lead to functional goals
- Strategies used in the assessment to elicit higher level responses provide a useful foundation for planning intervention for home and school.

### **Transition to Virtual TPBA2**

When COVID-19 hit the US and schools and programs closed, early childhood evaluation professionals struggled to figure out how to administer assessments to young children virtually. In Colorado, where many programs use *TPBA2*, the authors went to work to determine how to transition the face-to-face assessment process into one that can be done with video on a computer, tablet or phone. We know that the current model works well for children and families, so it is important to maintain the integrity of the process. Consideration was given to each of the aspects of the *TPBA2* described above.

### **Preparing for Virtual TPBA2**

For many of us, using technology poses challenges. Both teams and families need training to feel more comfortable with online video platforms. We discovered numerous

formats available aside from Zoom, including Google Meet, Google Duo, Skype, Skype Meet Now, Jitsi, Microsoft Teams, and FaceTime. Regardless, various school districts or programs have designated applications that must be used, which needs to be attended to prior to teams engaging in training before beginning assessments.

### **Gathering preliminary information from parents and caregivers**

In order to recommend modifications, we walked through each step of the traditional *TPBA2* process and re-imagined what changes would be needed to ensure a valid result. We began with the initial phase of the process, obtaining preliminary information from the parents and caregivers. We contacted Brookes Publishing, the publisher of *TPBA2*, and asked them to convert the Preliminary Information forms to fillable forms available online. *The Child and Family History Questionnaire*, the *Daily Routines Rating Form*, and the *All About Me* were made available and downloadable for free at <https://downloads.brookespublishing.com>. (Sign up for a free account, log in, and type TPBA2 in the search bar.) Once completed the information is available for all team members to see on the preferred/required online platform.

### **Providing preliminary information to families**

A form letter was composed to introduce the virtual process to the family. In addition, new forms were developed to help families plan for the play sessions and/or home videos. A checklist called “*You’ve Got This*” was created to help families identify the types of toys and materials available in the home that might be used to create play scenarios or activities. In addition, a worksheet to help families and teams to think about how different materials could be combined to look at different skills was generated. These new forms are intended to be

used in discussion with team members during a preplanning meeting with the family. (See <https://downloads.brookespublishing.com>).

### **Capturing an authentic picture of the child**

Doing TPBA2 virtually means that the traditional role of the play facilitator needs to be assumed by a family member. Of course, families are always interacting with their child, but typically not as professionals observe. This is a situation that would induce stress in most people! We know that the role of play facilitator requires a great deal of skill. The play facilitator needs to elicit a wide range of skills across all domains in natural, fun interactions. We anticipated that not all families understand how to elicit what teams need to see, and not all feel comfortable being observed interacting with their child. Consequently, we needed to design strategies to allow families to feel comfortable and not intimidated.

We suggested that families be given three choices for how to do the assessment: 1) take short video clips of the child throughout the day and send/upload them to the team; 2) do a play session at home, videoing the child and parent playing together in several planned play scenarios; 3) do a combination of 1 and 2, with a shorter play session with the team. This is the recommended approach, as the teams get samples of daily routines as well as the ability to observe play and elicit specific information by coaching the parent. Families are sent the three preliminary forms describe above to be completed online. The *“You’ve Got This”* checklist of items the parent might have in the home is also provided. The Family Facilitator and/or interpreter helps the family complete these, if needed, in an online or phone discussion. It is also useful to give the parents ideas of how to capture the best video clips (e.g., including distance, lighting, sound), so as to make sure team members can see all areas of development.

Evaluation teams may not initially know the best advice to give families on these technical aspects. However, teams will learn more and refine their guidance as each virtual assessment is completed.

### **Choices and planning**

TPBA2 teams gain a great deal of information from the family before the assessment. In fact, the play plan is based on the preliminary information gained from families. This information, including additional questions the team has, is shared in a meeting as the team sets up the play area with toys and materials best suited to engage the child. This process is the same in the modified online TPBA2, but it happens virtually and includes the family members. During this meeting, parents and team members practice using the preferred/required online video platform to ensure comfort. The family facilitator and other team members help the family understand the new process, give them choices for implementation, and provided supports for their new role as a play facilitator. The planning process is slightly different for each option, but families are key to a successful plan.

### **Virtual TPBA2: OPTION 1**

If families elect Option 1, recording video clips of their child throughout the day, the team needs to have a virtual meeting to discuss the Preliminary Information and decide what types of play, routines, and activities would be helpful for the team to see. For example, families might video the routines they may find difficult, enjoyable playtimes, outdoor play, and shared book reading. Typically, three to five minutes clips capture the essence of the interaction and engagement.

### **Virtual TPBA2: OPTION 2**

Option 2 is doing a virtual play assessment with the family members as the play facilitators. Planning includes discussing which activities each family member likes to do with the child, so these can be captured during the play session if possible. The team uses the Play Plan form to help families think about how the materials and toys in their home can be combined into play sets. This meeting also allows the team to meet the family, answer questions, and try to set the parent at ease in a comfortable conversation. The team supports the family in their play facilitation by coaching the family in real time through the audio of the device.

### **Virtual TPBA3: OPTION 3**

Option 3 is the combination of 1 and 2. Planning involves meeting with the family virtually prior to the live play session. This option may include two preliminary meetings with families. The first is a discussion about daily routines and activities to video at home prior to the play date. The second takes place after the team has reviewed the home videos and has determined what other observations would be useful, as described in Option 2. A second online planning meeting with the Family Facilitator and other team members is held, usually a day prior to the actual assessment. As with Option 2, the team helps the family think about fun play ideas and novel toys and materials to introduce to the child in order for the team to observe the child's new problem solving or play skills.

### **Play Coach**

For Options 2 and 3, family members will be playing with their child while the team watches virtually. The planning sessions have laid the foundation. The person who would ordinarily be the Play Facilitator now becomes a *Play Coach* helping the parent with ideas for



expanding the play. The play coach offers suggestions for parallel play, modifying repetitive actions, adding ideas to increase engagement or motivation, combining objects in new ways, and expanding language. The team communicates with the play coach through chat features indicating their ideas for eliciting skills they would like to observe. The Play Coach is not telling the parent what to do, but rather offering occasional suggestions in a non-directive fashion. For example, the coach might say, “I wonder what would happen if you encourage him to keep trying and wait a little bit before helping him.” The coach also supports the parent. “Oh, that was great! He’s really working at it!” Play coaching helps team members and the family identify specific intervention strategies might work for the child.

### **Family Facilitation**

In the virtual TPBA, the role of the Family Facilitator needs to change depending on how many family members are present in the home for the assessment. In a typical TPBA2, the Family Facilitator sits with the family members, when they are not playing with their child, and becomes a co-observer. In the virtual version of TPBA2, this role is only possible if there are two adults present for the assessment. The Family Facilitator can then talk to one parent on the phone, while the other parent is playing. In the case of there being only one parent present, comments and questions need to be made at the end of the session.

### **Use of interpreters**

The use of interpreters and cultural mediators is always an important factor when doing a TPBA2 with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. We needed to determine the best ways to ensure appropriate resources for these families. Many applications have a means for integrating interpreters into the process. To bolster the skills of educational

professionals, the Colorado Department of Education recently hosted a webinar on successfully assessing dual language learners and their families using TPBA2 virtual. The recorded webinar will be featured at this website <https://www.cde.state.co.us/early/cfpreresources> in the [coming days](#).

### **Debriefing**

The debriefing session with the family is the same as in the traditional *TPBA2*, but virtual. Debriefing occurs right after the play session in the case of Option 2 and 3. Debriefing for Option 1 should be set up as soon as all team members have reviewed the home videos. A downloadable form is available to summarize the child's strengths, next steps, and ideas for home (See <https://downloads.brookespublishing.com>).

### **Team discussion**

Team review of the *TPBA2* Observation Guidelines and Age Tables occurs as soon as possible after the assessment regardless of in-person or virtual. For Option 1, the team needs to schedule an online meeting after the home videos have been reviewed. In some cases, more video clips may be needed to get a better picture, or a home video session may be requested to gain more information. For Options 2 and 3, the discussion can take place after the end of the play session, giving team members a break to review their domain notes.

### **Follow-up with teams after implementation**

After six weeks of implementation, six local education agency teams provided feedback on what was working and continuing issues. The following findings are from these teams.

- 1) The process takes longer than a typical TPBA2 because multiple preliminary virtual meetings are often needed with the family. Teams have started scheduling the assessments accordingly.
- 2) Practice with the online video platform is key to a successful session. Some families take longer than others to get comfortable and may need suggestions for positioning to video. (Some provided instructions for Do-It-Yourself holders.)
- 3) Teams have become more confident over time, their interactions with families are also more comfortable, and they are finding the process is going more smoothly.
- 4) Most families used their smartphones for video. Many families did not have a computer or tablet, and these are not as easy to maneuver as smartphones
- 5) Most families are choosing Option 3, with both home videos and a live virtual session with the team.
- 6) Teams found the home videos very helpful and most indicated they will add this to the process even after COVID-19.
- 7) Teams feel they are getting sufficient and valid information for making eligibility decisions and writing meaningful goals
- 8) Teams indicated the hardest area to assess via video is articulation. Video doesn't always capture the sounds the child is making.
- 9) Most teams reported that they had primarily seen only one parent in the session. Therefore, any questions or comments for the parent needed to be made in between play activities or after the session. The lack of ability to use the Family Facilitator in the traditional role was seen as an issue but did not impact the results.

10) A few families opted to delay the assessment until they could do it in person, but the great majority chose to do the virtual assessment.

11) Families enjoyed the process, said they had learned a lot about their child doing the videos, and thanked the team for the opportunity to do the assessment in this manner.

## **Summary**

It is unclear how long schools and programs will be closed due to COVID-19, but assessment teams are finding new ways to interact virtually with families. What we found in Colorado is that Transdisciplinary Play-based Assessment-2 can be modified and done in a way that give teams the information needed to identify children in need of special services. Feedback from teams found that the process is more time-consuming, with more upfront planning time needed with families. One important finding is that all coordinators interviewed indicated that the home videos added greatly to the process and they planned to keep this element as an option for families after they return to in-person assessments.

## **Resources**

[Colorado Department of Education webinar on virtual TPBA2](#)

Colorado Department of Education webinar on using interpreters in TPBA2 (coming soon).

Downloadable, fillable forms for virtual TPBA2: <https://downloads.brookespublishing.com>

## **Reference**

Linder, T. (2008). *Transdisciplinary Play-based Assessment-2*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.