

An Example of the Power of Evoking in Young Children

The Gesell Developmental Assessment is administered to preschool- and school-age children to determine their developmental readiness for school. Matching a child's readiness to the demands of a particular grade in school is an important determining factor for success. For example, if children aren't developmentally ready for the tasks of first grade, they may work unduly hard to keep up but eventually fall behind. Their confidence may wane over time and a negative view of school takes root, which has consequences on their sustained effort and outcome.

When giving this assessment to 4-year-olds, we ask them to write their name on a piece of paper. At this age many children are just developing the skills required for this task, and even though they want to comply, most lack confidence to do it "right" so they simply refuse. The following is an account of what happens in most every conversation I—and other examiners—had with the unsure 4-year-olds around this request.

EXAMINER: Please write your name on the piece of paper in front of you.

CHILD: I can't do it. (*Does not attempt.*)

EXAMINER: *If you were going to write your name, what would you do first?*

CHILD: (*Picks up the pencil and begins writing on the paper, in whatever way possible.*)

Looking back over the predictable sequence of events, we can now see the MI skill of evoking at work. A child with very low confidence initially refuses to pick up the pencil, but when the evoking open question is posed, it does several things to encourage confidence and ignite action. First, hypothetical thinking phrased as "if you were going to .. ." sets up an experimental versus right-answer tone and the child's hesitations fade away. Second, the question "What would you do?" evokes a consideration of how to move ahead. And finally, breaking down the overwhelming task into smaller steps resulted in bravely picking up the pencil and moving ahead.