

UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL EVALUATION

Evaluations, and their results, generate feelings of both relief and confusion in parents. These rigorous tests are the process by which a determination(s) are finally made after months -- or sometimes even years -- of frustration, worry, fear, and sometimes shame. Parents who have watched and worried over a child where something didn't seem "quite right" take an important step when they decide to have an evaluation, and then receive the findings. These reports detail a great deal about their child's strengths, weaknesses, and neurological development.

Outside of a specific diagnosis however, most parents really don't understand what psychoeducational evaluation reports communicate about their children. This is unfortunate because a comprehensive testing battery provides so much more than a label -- **if parents are able to understand the results**. What's even more concerning, despite enduring up to eight hours of testing; most children/adolescents do not attend the specialist's feedback meeting to review the findings with their parents. And yet there is so much that can be gained from understanding one's own report specifics. Test findings often outline a child's natural learning style, detailed by specific strengths and weaknesses and the biological explanation for challenges. The psychologist can explain that "the testing showed us that you are very smart. You just have a problem with your memory." After so much frustration, possible self-blame, or self-loathing, it is very powerful for a child to hear a specialist reinforce that they are smart and capable, *and back it up with evidence*.

The most important thing to remember when talking about the psychoeducational evaluation is that it is the process of testing that provides the results. No single test can be used to diagnose. No single score can stand alone to indicate a specific strength or weakness. **It is critical to remember that the specialist looks for a pattern of strengths and weaknesses that emerges across several tests.**

This three part article series examines many aspects of psychoeducational evaluations. Are you considering having your child tested, or re-evaluated? Do you understand many terms used in your own child's evaluation report? Do you understand the technical jargon used to explain your child's capabilities? Do you suspect specific problems but don't know how your concerns relate to the information reflected in the specialist's report? This month we'll examine the basic reasons a child is tested, and when it is best to be re-evaluated. We'll also explore how to evaluate a specialist for this all-important battery of tests. Next month we'll dissect the entire process, explain the different tests, and what the results mean. Month three will examine common questions parents ask when dealing with the spectrum of learning or organizational challenges.

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BRAIN BYTE



DID YOU KNOW?

TRUE OR FALSE LEARNING INCREASES THE NUMBER OF BRAIN CELLS.

FALSE. Although learning doesn't increase the NUMBER of brain cells, it does increase a cell's size, number of branches and its ability to develop more complex networks.

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WHEN SHOULD YOU CONSIDER AN EVALUATION?

Parents decide to have their children tested in a variety of ways. In some cases, the school counselor or a teacher has suggested it. In other cases, the parents themselves suspect that their child needs to be evaluated. **Parents often report that they just “know” that their child is brighter than their schoolwork demonstrates, or that something just “doesn’t add up.”** Oftentimes, what parents and/or teachers have determined is that *something* is affecting the child’s ability to perform in school, that the challenge is not simply a lack of effort on the child’s part. Similarly, there may be a suspicion that “acting out” behavior stems from frustration that the student is experiencing.

While there is no hard and fast rule, typically, learning issues do not appear suddenly and they do not impact just one s. Learning issues can often be traced back several years. If you suspect that your child may have learning issues, it is important to document the problems you see in order to help determine whether there is a pattern of difficulty. It is important to recognize that not all students who are struggling academically need to be tested. Prior to having a child undergo a formal evaluation, parents should work with their child’s teacher to try alternative learning strategies. The child’s response to these interventions can provide clues about whether further assessment needs to be done. Most frequently, students who are having a hard time in a subject are able to work through the issue with extra help or with non-traditional approaches. *When a child continues to struggle despite the additional help, this can be an indication that there is a neurologically-based learning disability that requires a formal evaluation.*

Common academic issues include:

- Poor performance in one specific area or subject
- Poor reading comprehension
- Difficulty remembering basic math facts
- Difficulty putting their thoughts into writing
- Poor spelling
- Difficulty remembering what he or she has studied
- Poor performance on tests despite the fact that they have studied
- Difficulty finishing work or tests in the allotted time
- Difficulty identifying what information is important when they read or study material
- Difficulty with long-term projects or follow-through
- Poor organization
- Poor attention in class/excessive daydreaming

There are also some children who are bright and are able to compensate for their difficulties by working extremely hard or doing “extra credit” to boost their grades. Parents will often comment that their child’s grades fail to reflect the amount of work that they’ve put in: “I feel bad. She works so hard and she sees that schoolwork comes so much more easily for her friends.” Unfortunately, unless these children act out, they often slip through the cracks because they manage to keep their heads above water. Many of these children are not identified until middle school, when the academic demands finally exceed the child’s ability to compensate.

RE-EVALUATION

Children who are evaluated and receive services through their schools are required to be re-evaluated every three years in order to determine whether the child continues to be eligible for services. Appropriate interventions can often help children acquire the strategies they need to compensate in areas where they are weak. As a result, students who receive services for an extended period of time may no longer need additional services. Further, current research has shown that the brain goes through numerous periods of growth, during which there can be development in areas of that had previously been weak. The process of re-evaluating a child will help determine a profile of his/her current strengths and weaknesses. This information can then be used to determine age- and grade-appropriate interventions.

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FINDING A SPECIALIST FOR TESTING

If you have decided that your child would benefit from testing, it is worthwhile to do some research before you choose a psychologist. Children can be tested through the school system or they can be tested by an independent psychologist. The learning resource specialist or administrator at your child's school can often give you guidance about how to pursue testing. Because testing is fairly costly (and insurance doesn't usually cover the full cost), parents may consider to have the school conduct the assessment. If your child's needs are straightforward, a basic evaluation can usually identify the root cause of difficulties.

Deciding between school testing and an independent psychologist:

1. It is important to remember that the school system is not typically set up to offer an evaluation that is as comprehensive as that done by an outside clinician. **One of the most accepted definitions of a learning disability is a "severe discrepancy between the child's cognitive ability and their academic achievement."** School assessments tend to successfully identify students with learning problems when the students are older and their academic failure is more pronounced. By design however, a school-based evaluation may miss subtle learning problems, particularly in bright children or younger children. For instance, it is difficult to diagnose a second-grade student as two years below grade-level. With bright children, it is possible for them to do fairly well on the basic academic testing, that is typically included in the battery of tests used by most schools. It may be necessary to do more intensive testing in order to tease out true areas of weakness.
2. The school system may not include specific tests that could offer critical information. Not to say that schools are not cooperative and willing to add tests to their batteries when specific tests are requested, but a psychologist who specializes in giving these tests can include the most beneficial testing for the most insightful results. Few parents would have the experience to know what types of tests to request school staff to include. I have met with families who have gone to the effort of having their child tested and who have been told that their child does not have a learning disability when, in fact they do. The best rule of thumb might be, "If a school-based evaluation does identify a learning issue, it is probably genuinely there. If they do not identify a learning issue, more evaluation may be necessary to outline core issues.
3. Time can also be a key concern when opting school-based evaluations. Despite the best of intentions, sometimes the school process takes longer than an independent specialist.

Regardless of school-based or independent testing, it is recommended to do your research and gather referrals by talking with school counselors, academic coaches, or friends you know who have had their children tested. Confident Student can help with the process!

The most important questions include:

- Introduction to the process – did they explain it well so that you understood exactly what would take place and the time needed at each step of the process? The assessment process typically takes *about* six to eight hours of actual testing and may be done in one day or over a couple of days, depending on the clinician and your child.
- The timeliness of the completed report -- 3 weeks or 3 months to finish the report?
- The quality of the report that they received - A comprehensive assessment should include a wide range of tests that can provide a multi-layered picture of your child's strengths and weaknesses. A typical evaluation will look at your child's cognitive ability, their academic achievement, and a number of more specific skills such as their attention or executive functioning. A good evaluation will pull apart the numbers and help you understand exactly what skills are contributing to their academic problems and how to strengthen them.
- Was the report presented in a way that was understandable? A good evaluation will do more than give you a superficial picture of your child based on a few scores. This should include suggestions and recommendations as well as diagnostic impressions.

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Dr. Waxman welcomes any questions regarding educational testing: 410.933.1465.**

UPCOMING EVENTS

MENTAL HEALTH FAIR & TOWN HALL MEETING

Learn More about Baltimore County Mental Health Resources.

Participate in an open discussion about available resources in the county.

Wednesday, October 8th, 10 am – 2 pm

Oregon Ridge Park

For more information: 410.235.1178, ext. 202

“IN OUR OWN VOICE – LIVING WITH MENTAL ILLNESS”

An interactive presentation about living with mental illness. Hear personal stories of dark days, acceptance, treatment, coping strategies, successes, hopes and dreams.

NAMI, Baltimore Chapter

Wednesday, October 8th, 7 – 9pm

Govans – Boundary United Methodist Church

5210 York Rd, Baltimore

For more information: 410.435.2600

COLLEGE ISSUES & PREP: TAKE CHARGE OF THE PROCESS!

TLCI Professional Seminar Series

Main Presenter: Mary Turos

Early Decision or Early Action?

How much do grades and SAT scores really count?

What do admissions officers really want?

Follow up Presentation Topics:

How to prepare for the private college interview

Properly representing yourself

Tuesday, October 14th, 7:30 – 9:30pm

Christ Episcopal Church, 6800 Oakland Mills Rd, Columbia

Early Registration (by Oct 6) \$10,

General Registration \$15

Teenagers FREE

For more information: 410-730-0073

MENTAL ILLNESS AWARENESS WEEK

OCTOBER 5 – 11 THIS YEAR'S THEME IS "TAKE ACTION TO CHANGE THE NATION."

To learn more, visit: mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/highlights/october2003/awareness

IMPORTANT FACTS:

- 1 in 5 families are affected by psychiatric disorders
- Types of psychiatric disorders include: ADHD, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety disorder – all of which can impact learning!
- Psychiatric disorders can affect a person of any age
- According to a 2001 Surgeon General Study, 12% of children under the age of 18 years have a diagnosable mental illness
- 80% don't get the help they need
- Recognizing early-onset mental illness is critical
- Early treatment results in earlier and more complete recovery

INSPIRATION CORNER

“We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust the sails.”

-AUTHOR UNKNOWN-

