



## UNDERSTANDING THE PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL EVALUATION: WHEN RESULTS CONFIRM LEARNING CHALLENGES

After all the worry, rationalizations, and/or blame, your child's psychoeducational evaluation report confirms that your child actually does have a neurologically-based learning challenge. *Now what????* Regardless of the extent of a parent's suspicions, seeing the facts in black and white can be as much of a shock as any other medical diagnosis. And while trying to accept the reality of their child's situation, parents can't help but race from one question to the next: How do I make sense of the report findings? What is the next best thing to do? Can this affect my child's ability to go to college? What does the future hold?

*This is the third article of a three part series examining psychoeducational evaluations, the types of tests included and what the findings mean.* As discussed in last month's newsletter, the initial portion of your child's psychoeducational assessment evaluates cognitive abilities. Once determined, the evaluator can focus on areas identified as particular "areas of weakness." The two most common concerns parents have are whether their child has a learning disability and/or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). This month, we will discuss the types of tests that are used to make this kind of determination, and how they might be interpreted relative to the initial concerns.

There are a number of test batteries that are used to assess academic functioning. A battery is a collection of subtests that make up one testing kit or instrument. Generally, an individual without learning problems should achieve academic skills at a level that is roughly commensurate with intellectual ability. Currently, one of the most commonly accepted practices in Baltimore County and Baltimore City for diagnosing a learning disability is the "discrepancy model:" **the finding that there is a "significant" discrepancy between the child's cognitive ability and their academic performance, in one or more areas.**

Each state provides guidelines for determining the level of discrepancy that is required in order to qualify for services in the schools. Often, in order to receive services in public schools, students need to demonstrate a weakness in broad areas of academic functioning, such as reading, writing or arithmetic. In reality, there are many underlying skills that contribute to one's reading level or math skills. A thorough evaluation should help uncover the specific skills where your child is struggling and/or may benefit from intervention.

Some of the most common batteries that are used to assess academic achievement are the Woodcock Johnson-III Tests of Achievement (WJ-III) and the Wechsler Individualized Achievement Test-II (WIAT-II), although there are also other batteries. The WJ-III and the WIAT-II were designed to measure a broad range of general functioning in areas including reading, math and written expression. Reading, writing and arithmetic are comprised of many underlying skills. Although two children may both be having difficulty reading (and get similar scores on a reading test), their reading difficulties may be related to totally different weaknesses. For example, one student may read well but doesn't pay close attention to what they're reading and therefore cannot answer any of the reading comprehension questions. Another student may not be able to read the passage at all and therefore they cannot answer the reading comprehension questions, either. **It is critical to determine why a student is having problems in a given academic area.**

The WJ-III and the WIAT-II will provide composite scores (based on several subtests in one area) and the individual scores for each subtest. Typically, the evaluator will also administer additional tests that are designed to assess the specific skills underlying many academic problems. Additionally, it is important to gather information from the child's teachers. In order to do this, the evaluator may contact the school and/or give parents several checklists to complete and return. Parents may also be given questionnaires used to detail what happens at home.

## AREAS OF ACADEMIC FUNCTIONING

A neurologically-based attention deficit or a weakness in reading frequently reflects difficulty in one or more underlying skills. It is beyond the scope of this article to review all of the current research and theories about these disorders; however, the skills that should be considered include: phonetic awareness or decoding, reading comprehension and fluency, attention, memory and retrieval, and executive functioning. It is important to understand the specific areas of weakness in order to determine the most effective strategies for strengthening a child's academic skills.

**PHONETIC AWARENESS AND DECODING** refers to the ability to associate a specific letter with the sound it makes. For example, remembering that the letter *b* makes a /b/ sound or the letters *ch* make the /ch/ sound. *This is one of the primary areas of difficulty in children who have reading disorders.* Some children have difficulty remembering the associations and therefore can't sound out an unfamiliar word when they see it (decoding) while others have a hard time distinguishing one sound from another (phonemic awareness). Although it is important to rule out the possibility that a child has a hearing problem, this is different from a weakness in phonemic awareness, which refers to the brain's ability to distinguish between letters (such as the /s/ sound from the /z/ sound). Children with a problem in phonemic awareness frequently have great difficulty sounding out unfamiliar words as they're reading and have difficulty spelling words. This may not be apparent if the child has acquired a strong sight vocabulary because they recognize many words without needing to sound them out. In order to assess this, a child may be asked to sound out or spell nonsense words.

**READING COMPREHENSION** refers to the ability to understand, process and recall information that has been read. One of the best ways to determine the underlying causes of poor reading comprehension is to administer a test that requires the child to read aloud. When the difficulty in comprehension reflects a weakness in the ability to decode words, children may read slowly, stumble over words or substitute words that look similar. Poor comprehension can also indicate that the child fails to process and store what they are reading. Sometimes this is related to "inattention". When children have ADHD they still may not be able to answer questions about what they've read because they have not processed the material in a way that allows them to remember and recall it; however, if you listen to these children read aloud, they tend to read quickly and accurately. Sometimes children with ADHD also make errors when they're reading; however, if they were to slow down, they would have the ability to read accurately (although they still may not be able to answer questions).

**ATTENTION** is term that incorporates a number of skills. There are also a variety of ways to assess attention: formal tests given by the evaluator, parent and teacher checklists, some computerized tests, and a standardized developmental history. Frequently, parents will report that their child "doesn't seem to be listening" or is "easily distractible." It is critical to keep in mind, however, that many things can interfere with attention. It is also important to recognize that almost every learning and emotional issue disrupts attention. For example, a student who is anxious often presents as inattentive. They may be "paying attention" to their own thoughts and worries, rather than the world around them. A range of other emotional issues can interfere with a child's ability to pay attention to their work. ***It is extremely important to rule out the possibility that other issues are causing inattention so that your child is not mis-identified as having ADHD.*** Children with ADHD will have problems, in addition to a weakness in attention.

**FLUENCY** refers to the speed with which a student can accurately perform tasks that should be automatic. These are tasks that we assume do not use a great deal of mental energy (such as recalling single-digit math facts or reading short sentences). Some students have the academic skills necessary to perform the tasks but they do so at an unusually slow pace. These are the students who never seem to complete their work in the allotted time.

One accommodation that has become popular for these students is to give them extended time on tests. Although schools are frequently willing to provide this accommodation, it is getting more difficult to get this accommodation approved on standardized tests like the SATs. Students with learning disabilities and ADHD tend to score poorly on tests of fluency. Students with reading disorders truly work slowly and need additional time to complete their work.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### **AUTISM AWARENESS NIGHT WITH SANTA**

Tuesday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, 4:00 – 9:00 pm

The Main Street Tower, Bel Air

Sponsored by The Main Street Towson and Pathfinders for Autism

Enjoy a night out dining with Santa and other families that understand your unique situation in a setting designed for your family's needs:

- gluten & casein-free menu items
- reduced background music
- a designated "quiet area"
- restaurant staff trained in autism sensitivity

**Please call ahead and mention Pathfinders for Autism: 410.838.8007**

### **IMPROVING COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR RELATIVE**

Wednesday, December 17<sup>th</sup>, 7:00 – 9:00 pm

NAMI, Baltimore Chapter, Govans-Boundary United Methodist Church – Rear Annex, 5210 York Road, Baltimore

Communication with a loved one suffering with mental illness demands patience and skill. Improve your communications skills with a loved one during the holiday season. This workshop is free to all family members of persons with mental illness.

Space is limited, reservations required.

**Contact: 410.435.2600**

### **Understanding the Psychoeducational Evaluation, Con't from p. 2**

Students with ADHD have difficulty with time management so they often fail to keep track of the passage of time as they work and, as a result, run out of time. These students may need additional time but typically it is necessary to impose some external structure on their time such as more frequent cues, "You have 20 minutes left to finish your test. You have 10 minutes left to finish your test."). Otherwise, they are just as likely to run out of time—even when the time has been extended.

**WORKING MEMORY** refers to the ability to remember information long enough to do something with it. In order to understand memory challenges, it is best to review the basics of how an individual remembers. *Encoding* refers to the initial perception and registration of information. *Storage* is the retention of encoded information over time. *Retrieval* refers to the processes involved in using stored information. Whenever people successfully recall a prior experience, they must have encoded, stored, and retrieved information about the experience. Conversely, memory failure—for example, forgetting an important fact—reflects a breakdown in one of these stages of memory.

Working memory is different than long-term memory. Long-term memory refers to information that you have learned, or acquired over time. Working memory refers to information that you "juggle" in your mind as you try to do something with it (e.g., remember a phone number long enough to dial, remember what the teacher has said long enough to write it down).

**Memory is one of the most complex areas of functioning and can be impacted by a number of processing disorders.**

Two areas that are frequently impacted in children with learning disabilities and attention deficit are visual working memory and auditory working memory. Some children have difficulty remembering information when it is presented as a series of directions or numbers. These children may or may not have as much difficulty when they are asked to remember information that is presented in a meaningful context. For example, auditory working memory can be assessed by asking the child to remember a story that you read to them. Children with an attention deficit often have trouble organizing material in a way that helps them remember it. Most of us are able to process auditory information as we hear it and organize it (by making visual images of it or chunking it into smaller, related topics). Children who can't do this simply hear a list of meaningless material and they are quickly overwhelmed by the details. That is why some children do better when they hear a story, which is already organized in a meaningful way.

An assessment may also look at one's ability to remember visual information (for example, the child may be asked to remember where an array of dots are placed on a grid). Children with reading disabilities as well as children with attention deficit often have difficulty with tasks like this. For children with a reading disorder, they may have a hard time forming visual images in their mind (which is one factor that undermines their ability to look at a word and "know" if it is spelled correctly or not).

## BRAIN BYTE



### **DID YOU KNOW?**

***YOUR BRAIN GENERATES 25 WATTS OF POWER WHILE YOU'RE AWAKE --- ENOUGH TO ILLUMINATE A LIGHT BULB!***

## TEN INITIAL STEPS TO SUPPORT A CHILD WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY

The following ten steps, recommended by the National Center of Learning Disabilities (NCLD), are a great place to start feeling more comfortable with a new diagnosis, and provide effective support for your child or family member. For more information, visit their website: [www.nclld.org](http://www.nclld.org)

1. **LEARN MORE ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES.** Current information can help you understand that your child does not learn in the same way as others do, outline resources available in the area, and what you can do to make life and learning easier for your child.
2. **BECOME AN UNOBTUSIVE DETECTIVE.** Look for clues that can tell you how your child learns best. Use these clues to creatively motivate and support your child's learning.
3. **TEACH THROUGH YOUR CHILD'S AREAS OF STRENGTH.** Respect your child's natural learning style. Learn strategies to help support it.
4. **RESPECT AND CHALLENGE YOUR CHILD'S NATURAL INTELLIGENCE.** Most children with learning disabilities have average or above average intelligence that can be engaged and challenged through using a multi-sensory approach.
5. **REMEMBER THAT MISTAKES DON'T EQUAL FAILURE.** Model a good humored response and acceptance of your own mistakes. Remind your child that mistakes can lead to new solutions, rather than be thought of as "the end of the world."
6. **RECOGNIZE THAT THERE MAY BE SOME THINGS YOUR CHILD WON'T BE ABLE TO DO OR WILL HAVE LIFELONG TROUBLE DOING.**  
Help your child understand that this is the way it is. Every person has something he or she can not do, or has trouble doing.
7. **BE AWARE THAT STRUGGLING WITH YOUR CHILD OVER READING, WRITING, AND HOMEWORK CAN DRAW YOU INTO AN ADVERSARIAL POSITION WITH YOUR CHILD.** The two of you can end up angry and frustrated, and can send messages to your child confirming he or she is a failure. Positive solutions can bring positive results.
8. **USE TELEVISION CREATIVELY.** It can be a great medium for learning, when used properly.
9. **MAKE SURE BOOKS ARE AT YOUR CHILD'S READING LEVEL.** Most children with learning disabilities will be reading below grade level. Recreational reading should be fun and enjoyable, not a challenging activity.
10. **ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO DEVELOP HIS OR HER SPECIAL TALENTS.** Pursuing areas of talent allow a child to experience confidence and success. Help your child develop a place to shine!

## Understanding the Psychoeducational Evaluation, Con't from p. 3

**EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING** refers to the ability to organize information in a way that enables someone to achieve a future goal. There are a number of skills that come under the general umbrella of executive functioning: planning and organization, time management, working memory, emotional regulation, self-monitoring and the ability to inhibit one's impulses. *These skills are dependent on maturation in specific areas of the brain. This means that until those areas develop, it is beyond the child's ability to perform skills that require strong executive functioning.*

The brain continues to develop through one's 20s. Children who have ADHD show slower development in the areas of the brain related to executive functioning—some experts suggest that their brain development is about 30% slower than their peers (so a 10-year-old with ADHD may really be functioning at the level of a typical 7-year-old). As a result of this, executive functioning is one of the key deficits for children who have ADHD. In many cases, children are able to compensate for their ADHD in elementary school but they start to stumble in middle school when the demands on executive functioning increase significantly. Looking at an assignment to write a research report highlights many of the executive function demands that are expected by middle school. A student must be able to break the assignment down into smaller chunks which they attack over time (rather than waiting until the night before the assignment is due). They must be able to do their research, figure out what information is particularly important, keep track of their notes, put their notes into an outline and then write up an organized paper. Each one of these areas can present difficulties for children who have difficulty with their executive functioning. There are some formal test batteries that can be administered to assess executive functioning; however, checklists that gather information from parents and teachers provide the best insight about a child's functioning in the real world.

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 when making the final determinations.**

### **AFTER THE DIAGNOSIS**

The diagnosis of a learning challenge ends speculation for parents, and can pave the way for different strategies to more effectively support their child. The basic recommendations for any parent receiving news that their child has a learning disability is to learn about the disorder, share the news with others who can offer support, and build a strong network of support for your child. And ask a lot of questions.

**Here are some of the most common questions asked by parents:**

***My child got scores on reading-related tests that are within the average range but they are not nearly as strong as her cognitive abilities. Is this a learning disability?***

There is debate in the professional community about whether a learning disability can be defined as 1) a significant discrepancy between one's cognitive abilities and one's reading skills or 2) if specific reading skills must be significantly below average. Although many of the schools use a discrepancy model; there must also be evidence that the weakness is causing impairment in the child's school functioning. It is not sufficient to show that the child is not working at a level that is consistent with their potential. In the case of the second definition, a significant discrepancy would reflect a *weakness* if a child's skills were within the average range, but it would not necessarily indicate that there was a reading disability such as dyslexia. Unfortunately, there is no definitive answer to this question. Most professionals would agree, however, that a child with a learning disability would demonstrate difficulty across several language-based tests *and* it would cause impairment in school functioning.

**Understanding the Psychoeducational Evaluation, Con't from p. 5*****What now? What do I do with the results of my child's evaluation?***

Typically, the evaluation should be shared with the school during a "team meeting." This meeting may include a range of professionals from the school but minimally it should include the student's teacher, the special educator, a school psychologist and the parents. At that meeting, they will review the evaluation and determine how the child's weaknesses are causing impairment in their learning. A number of accommodations can be implemented and/or support services provided, based on the test findings and the recommendations of the psychologist who did the evaluation.

***Will my child always have this problem?***

Because the brain continues to develop through early adulthood, it difficult to forecast whether your child can "outgrow" certain issues or whether tutoring or coaching will help remediate weaknesses. In most cases, however, there will be some residual effects that would continue to be evident should your child be tested as an adult. For children with reading disorders, in most cases they learn to read well enough to meet life's demands. They may always read more slowly and typically, they remain poor spellers. Children with ADHD tend to outgrow hyperactivity and, as their brain develops, they are likely to acquire the ability to perform various executive functions. However, they are also likely to continue to need to work harder than someone else might in order to stay organized and manage their time effectively. We know that there are a number of areas that continue to present challenges in adults with ADHD.

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

*The information in this article series is not intended to replace the feedback given by a psychologist or learning specialist concerning your own loved one. It is intended to enhance an understanding of the evaluation results.*

**INSPIRATION CORNER**

**"If we did all the things we are capable of doing,  
we would literally astonish ourselves."**

**- THOMAS A. EDISON -**



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