
PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS: WHAT EVERY PARENT SHOULD KNOW

By Andrea Canter, PhD, NCSP
Minneapolis Public Schools



The prospect of a psychological evaluation can cause a great deal of anxiety on the part of parents. When school personnel or physicians recommend such an evaluation, parents might imagine strange and intrusive procedures followed by diagnoses that further increase their apprehension. No one wants to hear that their child may have a disability, mental health disorder, or behavior problem. Yet, when conducted by qualified school-based or community professionals, psychological evaluations can be invaluable tools in understanding and addressing the learning and mental health needs of individual students and can positively affect the student's schooling and family life.

Sometimes, however, evaluations are conducted for the wrong reasons, using inappropriate methods, or with little regard for how parents and school personnel may use the results. Even competent psychological evaluations, if ignored or misunderstood, can lead to serious disagreement between parents and school personnel. Inappropriate or inadequate supports for student learning and/or behavior may result.

Psychological evaluations are much more useful when parents understand the purpose, strengths, and limitations of the various procedures, and if they have realistic expectations for the value of the results. Parents who understand the nature of psychological evaluations will be less apprehensive and better able to effectively participate in both the evaluation and any resulting services for their child.

Planning the Psychological Evaluation

Purpose of the evaluation. A psychological evaluation is a set of procedures, often including tests, that is administered by a licensed psychologist or credentialed school psychologist to obtain information about a student's learning, behavior, or mental health. In school settings, evaluations can be requested by parents, school personnel, and older students who are of majority age. School psychologists most often conduct evaluations as part of the special education team's determination as to whether a student has a disability and is eligible for special services. However, they might also conduct evaluations to help develop teaching or behavior plans for students, to identify significant mental health concerns, or to determine eligibility for gifted programs or school readiness.

Due process. When school teams consider special education services, evaluations must be conducted according to *due process* procedures—requirements that parents of minor students be notified of the need for an evaluation, invited to a planning meeting, and give their consent for the evaluation. Any psychological evaluation conducted for other purposes also requires parent consent. Students who have reached the age of majority must be included in planning the evaluation and give their own consent.

Involvement in planning. You should always be invited to a school conference to discuss the need for a psychological evaluation and should be given ample notice of the date and time of a meeting. You should feel comfortable in asking any questions about the reason for the evaluation and how the results will be used to help your child. Sometimes it helps to bring a trusted friend or family member to the meeting for moral support as well as to help clarify questions and answers. After all, two sets of ears are better than one. Always remember that you must give permission before an evaluation can begin. If you do not understand all of the issues, or if you need more time to think about it, you have the right to ask for more time before making a decision.

Community evaluations. The same considerations apply to evaluations conducted in the community. If your physician recommends an evaluation, be sure you understand why and how the evaluation will help your child. Set up an appointment with the person who will conduct the evaluation in order to ask questions and to feel comfortable with the process. Be sure to check with your health care provider

regarding what services are covered by your insurance and what costs might be incurred if you will be responsible for paying for all or part of the evaluation. If the evaluation is to address a school-related problem, you should first find out if your child is entitled to receive the evaluation through the school district, which would be a free service. With community evaluations, it is crucial that you understand who will receive a report of the results. Remember that only you, the parent, can give permission to share these results with others. (The exception would be a court-ordered evaluation.)

Limitations of Psychological Evaluations

It is important to recognize what psychological evaluations do and do not provide. Psychological evaluations can provide estimates of intellectual ability. Psychological evaluations also document the presence or absence of both positive and negative characteristics, such as strengths in reasoning or vocabulary or weaknesses in memory, self-confidence, or depression. However, psychological evaluations seldom give guidance in selecting specific methods for teaching or determining appropriate class assignment or grade placement, generally cannot provide information about the quality of instruction, and rarely provide insight regarding *why* certain characteristics or problems exist. Findings may help professionals develop ideas regarding the “why,” but answering such questions (if possible) typically requires a much broader set of information than what is gleaned from a psychological evaluation alone. Often the cause, if known, is not relevant to finding a solution because it is not a factor over which the school, family, or student has any control.

Sometimes you may want to request that a school provide an evaluation for a situation for which such requests might be impossible or inappropriate to honor. For example, you might want to seek an evaluation to assist with college admissions or eligibility for vocational training after graduation. Most school districts are not adequately staffed to provide those services, because the services are not directly relevant to the provision of a public school education. In those instances, schools will typically refer you to an appropriate resource elsewhere in the community.

Psychological Evaluation Procedures

Psychologists use different procedures or combinations of procedures depending upon the reason for the evaluation. In the case of *special education evaluations*, some types of procedures may be required by law to determine eligibility for service or if a student’s challenging behavior is related to a disability. For example, these procedures might include measures

of ability and achievement to identify a possible learning or cognitive disability. Generally, psychologists’ evaluation procedures fall into the following categories.

Standardized tests. Psychologists often use standardized tests of various abilities in order to compare an individual’s performance to an appropriate peer group. These tests are developed and *normed* (given to many individuals to determine how typical individuals perform) under standard conditions—using prescribed instructions, materials, scoring—to assure consistent and accurate results. Some common examples include the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), the Woodcock Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery, and the Kaufman Tests of Educational Achievement.

Rating scales. Rating scales are most often used to determine if certain behaviors or skills are present or typical of the student. Ratings depend on the perceptions and opinions of the rater. The rater(s) must be very familiar with the student in order to provide useful information; using multiple raters helps reduce the influence of biased perceptions. Ideally the rating scales are normed (developed) on similar student populations so that results indicate if a student’s skill, behavior, or emotional status is “typical” or significantly different from peer groups. Examples of commonly used rating scales include the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) and Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales.

Self-report scales. Older students are often asked to provide ratings of their own behavior and skills. These measures are similar (or even identical) to other rating scales, often are used in conjunction with teacher or parent rating scales, and often have been normed. It can be useful to compare how students perceive themselves relative to how others perceive them.

Observations. Psychologists can gather information about students’ learning and behavior by directly observing the students in natural settings, such as during class or social interactions. Observations not only address what the students are doing, but how others in the setting interact with them.

Interviews. Direct interviews with students enable the students to provide information about their histories, their interpersonal relationships, their concerns, their goals. As students mature, they are more likely to provide reliable and insightful information about themselves. The psychologist typically will summarize key information obtained through the student interview, as well as relevant information learned by interviewing others who know the student well (usually teachers and parents).

Comprehensive evaluation. The psychologist selects those procedures and tools that will help answer the referral concerns (such as poor reading skills, low

self-esteem, frequent fighting). The information gathered should include a review of what is already known, new information about areas of concern from a variety of sources, and verification of life factors (language or economics) that may affect the evaluation or the student's learning and behavior.

Factors That Influence Evaluation Results

Psychologists must take into account a number of factors that can influence the accuracy and usefulness of an evaluation, and thus affect how the evaluation results are used to change or support the student's school program. These factors include the student's familiarity with the test materials and tasks, the student's fluency in English, the quality of the test and materials (in terms of fairness to the student and characteristics that determine if a test is accurate and reliable), the student's attention and motivation during the evaluation, the match between what is tested and what has been taught, and the student's level of comfort during the evaluation.

How Evaluation Results Are Translated Into Useful Information

Parents and teachers should expect all reports of psychological evaluations to provide clear information and recommendations that are relevant to and feasible within the school system. To be useful, summaries of evaluations do not need to be long and detailed. Effective evaluation reports *succinctly* summarize the purpose, process, limitations, results, and recommendations resulting from the evaluation.

After the Evaluation: Digesting and Using the Information

The psychologist and other professionals involved in the evaluation usually provide both a written and a verbal report. They should also be available to answer your questions.

It is important that you feel comfortable asking the psychologist or others to further explain the results and what these mean for your child's education or mental health. Questions to consider might include:

- How will the school use this information to help my child?
- How can I use this information to help my child?
- Who else (if anyone) will receive this information?
- How long will the report of this evaluation remain in my child's school record?
- How can we be sure this information is accurate and fairly represents my child's abilities or personality?
- Are these results surprising or consistent with my observations of my child?

- Do the results of this evaluation help address my concerns about my child?

The evaluation can provide much information that can be difficult to digest all at one time. Often it is best to schedule a second meeting with school personnel to decide on any actions, services, or placements based on the evaluation rather than trying to decide what is to be done on the spot.

Before the next meeting read over the psychologist's report, contact the psychologist to clarify anything that is confusing, and, depending on your child's age, discuss the results and what they mean at an age-appropriate level.

Older students can often gain insight into their own school problems from a review of the evaluation and may have ideas for resolving their difficulties once they have this information.

What if You Disagree With the Evaluation

Sometimes you may disagree with the results of an evaluation. It is important that you have the opportunity to discuss your concerns with everyone involved and try to come to some consensus about either the evaluation or the recommendations.

You may identify factors that alter the interpretation of the results. Sometimes there are circumstances that school personnel do not know about, such as a divorce or death in the family. Stress on children in these situations can influence their response to evaluation. Sometimes there is an error that influences the results, such as an incorrect birth date. And sometimes you and school personnel will simply disagree on how to interpret the results of the evaluation.

Special education regulations allow you and others to document dissenting opinions and promote consideration of second opinions. You can obtain another evaluation and include that report in the record.

Although it is sometimes tempting to do so, it is rarely appropriate to request that the psychologist change statements or recommendations in the report unless there has clearly been an error or circumstances that seem to discredit the results of the evaluation.

Summary

Psychological evaluations are an everyday part of a school's student support system. When you understand the purpose, strengths, and limitations of these procedures and hold realistic expectations for their value, you will be better prepared to help your child and work effectively with school and community resources.

Resources

- Wodrich, D. L. (1997). *Children's psychological testing: A guide for nonpsychologists* (3rd ed.). Baltimore: Brookes. ISBN: 1557662770.
- Wright, P. W., & Wright, P. D. (2001). *Wrightslaw: From emotions to advocacy—The special education survival guide*. Boyne City, MI: Harbor House Law Press. ISBN: 1892320088.

Websites

National Association of School Psychologists—
www.nasponline.org

PACER Center (Parent Advocacy Coalition for
Educational Rights)—www.pacer.org

Andrea Canter, PhD, NCSP, is a school psychologist in the Minneapolis Public Schools and is Editor of the NASP Communiqué and consultant for special projects for NASP. This handout is adapted from an article submitted on behalf of NASP to the Teachers First website (posted September 2003).

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.



The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit