

WHAT ARE TESTS TESTING?

UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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Why might a child be evaluated?

Some children first come to the attention of a neuropsychologist in the pre-school years or even earlier, others as they transition into and begin the school years, and still others as they encounter the escalating demands of middle school and high school.

In terms of “diagnostic groups”, a pediatric neuropsychologist will often diagnose and work with children and adolescents with learning disabilities, attention disorders, autism spectrum disorders, executive functioning problems, genetic disorders, and neurological injuries.

An evaluation can serve many purposes. It may address the questions:

- Is there a problem? Tracking a child’s development relative to typical expectations.
- What is the problem? Identifying clinical diagnoses.
- What should we do about the problem? Making clinical and educational recommendations.
- Is what we’re doing working? Monitoring progress.

Who should do the evaluation?

A pediatric neuropsychologist is a doctoral level psychologist who is a licensed psychologist health provider, and who also has particular training and expertise in the diagnosis and management of neurologically based developmental, learning, and behavioral disorders of childhood.

Other evaluators who may become involved in child assessment are school psychologists (who may have a master’s degree or a doctorate); child psychologists (who have a doctorate but may not have an academic background in neuropsychology); speech-language pathologists (to assess oral and written language functioning); occupational and physical therapists (to assess sensory-motor skills); and educational specialists (to assess academic functioning).

What is done in an evaluation, and how is it translated into usable recommendations?

A good neuropsychological evaluation will take a holistic focus and will assess multiple aspects of a child's functioning. It will include intellectual assessment, academic testing, emotional assessment, and assessment of a broad range of neuropsychological domains (such as memory, language, visual-spatial skills, and executive functioning). It will typically not include assessment of gross motor skills, sensory integration, or any sort of medical evaluation.

It is important to understand the difference between evaluation and testing. A complete evaluation look at the testing in context; it integrates test data with history and clinical observation.

Most evaluations follow a specific process:

- The referral question
- Parent interview & history
- Test selection
- Test administration & behavioral observation
- Test Interpretation
- Feedback and reporting

What happens after the evaluation?

A good neuropsychologist should give parents more than a label. Parents should gain a better understanding of their child's developmental profile: their strengths and challenges, and how their child experiences the world. Parents should also expect to be supported in translating this understanding into a plan for helping their child with whatever challenges have prompted the evaluation.

No matter how skilled the clinician, or how good the evaluation, it will be of limited effectiveness if the understanding that is gained from it stops at the office door. Ideally, a neuropsychologist should be available to collaborate with families in the long term. A family might choose to bring the clinician into the special education process by inviting them to observe the child in school or to participate in a team meeting. They may also wish for the clinician to consult with other professionals involved in the care of the child: teachers, therapists, and health care professionals. The clinician should also be available as a resource to the parents themselves, to help them to cope with emerging challenges. With older children, the neuropsychologist might work with the child directly, to develop greater self-awareness and self-advocacy skills.