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Demystifying School Psychological Evaluations in Special Education Eligibility

Overview of Presentation

- 1) Purpose of special education evaluations
- 2) Evaluation process
- 3) Components of a psychoeducational evaluation and report
- 4) Impact of evaluation results on educational decisions
- 5) How evaluation results help inform special education eligibility

Purpose of Special Education Evaluations

To **identify the presence or absence of a disability** as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

AND

Determine if an identified disability has an adverse impact on educational performance

13 disability categories:

- Specific Learning Disability
- Intellectual Disability
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Other Health Impairment
- Emotional Disturbance
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Visual Impairment
- Deafness
- Hearing Impairment
- Deaf-Blindness
- Orthopedic
- Multiple Disabilities

IDEA Sec. 300.304 Evaluation procedures

(b) Conduct of evaluation. In conducting the evaluation, the public agency must—

(1) Use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information about the child, including information provided by the parent, that may assist in determining—

(i) Whether the child is a child with a disability under §300.8;
and

(ii) The content of the child's IEP, including information related to enabling the child to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum (or for a preschool child, to participate in appropriate activities);

Evaluation Process

- 60 day deadline after parent provides written consent for the evaluation, *unless* your state has established a different timeline
- Who could be involved in evaluation?
 - General education teacher
 - Special education teacher
 - School psychologist
 - Speech therapist
 - Physical therapist
 - Occupational therapist
 - School counselor and/or social worker
- Meeting is held with evaluators and parent(s) to discuss results and plan for student's educational programming
- Team makes eligibility determination collaboratively with the parents

IDEA Sec. 300.306 Determination of eligibility

(c) Procedures for determining eligibility and educational need.

(1) In interpreting evaluation data for the purpose of determining if a child is a child with a disability under §300.8, and the educational needs of the child, each public agency must—

(i) Draw upon information from a variety of sources, including aptitude and achievement tests, parent input, and teacher recommendations, as well as information about the child's physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behavior; and

(ii) Ensure that information obtained from all of these sources is documented and carefully considered.

(2) If a determination is made that a child has a disability and needs special education and related services, an IEP must be developed for the child in accordance with §§300.320 through 300.324.

If there is a disability...

- Does the disability have an adverse effect on academic performance?
- Does the student require special education or related services?
- What would the student's Individual Education Program (IEP) include?

School Psychologists' Involvement in Assessment

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recognizes that school psychologists are uniquely suited to promote best practices in assessment. Assessment is the process of gathering information to guide educationally relevant decisions. The process and products of assessment contribute to defining problems, identifying student assets and needs, determining current levels of the student functioning, estimating the rate of progress toward well defined goals, evaluating and recommending services to accelerate learning, and evaluating program outcomes (Ysseldyke et al., 2007).

Elements of a School Psychological Evaluation

...will depend on the referral question, state, and if it is an initial or re-evaluation

- Assessments should be targeted to area(s) of suspected disability
- School psychologists assess the current functioning of a student, the purpose is to identify individual strengths and weaknesses
 - The purpose is **not** to find something “wrong”
- State laws may impact components of an evaluation
 - *Be aware of state and district policies that address special education evaluation procedures*

School Psychological Evaluations May Include...

- Review of Available Records (grades, attendance, previous evaluations, etc.)
- Interviews
- Observations
- Questionnaires
- Reference-Normed Batteries (Academic, Cognitive)
- Projectives

Evaluation Examples: Varies by Suspected Disability

Intellectual Disability:

Will likely include:

- Cognitive Assessment
- Adaptive Assessment
- Developmental milestones/history

Emotional Disability:

Will likely include:

- Classroom Observation(s)
- Social Emotional Rating Scales

Developmental Delay:

Will likely include:

- Cognitive Assessment
- Adaptive Assessment
- Developmental Checklist

Common to all:

Review of Records, Parent & Teacher Interviews, Medical History/Existing Diagnoses

Components of a Psychological Assessment Report

- **Referral Question** - why the assessment was requested
- **Assessment Instruments** - list of what was done
- **Background Information** - picture of the student's history
 - Interviews, Review of Records
- **Assessment Results and Interpretation** - the new information
 - Observation(s)
 - Rating scales
 - "Test" scores
- **Summary** - integrated information within context of the student's history
- **Recommendations** - steps to take to support the student

What to look for in a Psychological Assessment Report

- **Referral Question**

- That your concerns are included

- **Assessment Instruments**

- A comprehensive list of everything that was done by the school psychologist or assessor

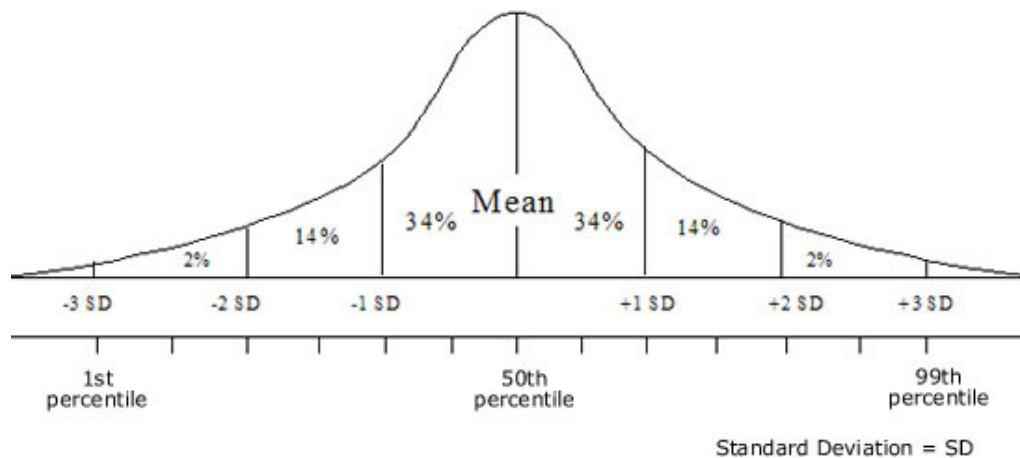
- **Background Information**

- That all information included is accurate
- That it gives a full picture of your student's history

What to look for in a Psychological Assessment Report

- **Assessment Results and Interpretation**
 - Overall functioning and areas of strength & weakness
 - How student performance on assessments compares with same-age peers
 - How it relates to the student's performance in school
- **Summary**
 - Review of the information in the report
 - Conclusion about a handicapping condition/disability
 - Does it answer the referral question?
- **Recommendations**
 - Are they personalized?
 - Appropriate?
 - Observable and measurable?

Understanding Assessment Results



Standard Scores - compares student score to the mean score

Percentiles - denotes the percent of peers that scored at or below student score

Grade Equivalent - compares student score to same-grade peers

Age Equivalent - compares student score to same-age peers

Common Assessment Instruments

Cognitive

- WISC, WPPSI, or WAIS
- WJ-COG
- KABC
- DAS
- RIAS
- UNIT

Academic

- WIAT
- WJ-ACH

Social/Emotional/Behavioral

- BASC
- Connors
- BRIEF
- ASRS

Adaptive

- Vineland
- ABAS

Evaluation Results: Inform Education Decisions

Possible outcomes of evaluation:

- Eligible for special education
- Not eligible for special education
- Eligible for 504 accommodations

Evaluation Results: Inform Education Decisions

If eligible for an IEP (Individual Education Program is written and implemented)...

- Needed services and service providers are identified
- Duration and frequency of services are determined
- Goals are formulated and monitored over a 1 year period

Eligibility Determination: Varies by Disability

Intellectual Disability:

- Significantly below average general intellectual functioning
- Significant deficits in adaptive behavior
- Manifested during the developmental period

Emotional Disability:

- Difficulty maintaining interpersonal relationships
- Unexpected types of behavior or feelings
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
- Tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems

Developmental Delay:

- Children 3-9 (some states limit this further)
- Significant delay in:
 - Physical development
 - Cognitive development
 - Communication development,
 - Social or emotional development,
 - Adaptive development

Evaluation Results: Inform Education Decisions

If not eligible for an IEP...

- Teams can explore other options for support
- Parent(s) can request an independent evaluation if they do not agree with outcome

Evaluation Results: Inform Education Decisions

If not eligible for an IEP but eligible for a 504...

- 504 Team meets to review disability and impact on functioning
- 504 plan is written
 - Includes accommodations to enable access to instruction
- 504 Plan is reviewed on an annual basis

School-based vs. Independent Evaluation

Evaluations conducted by a public school district are at no cost and must be completed within 60 days (or other state specified timeline)

- Results are part of confidential school record
- Evaluations are conducted by qualified professionals, typically employed by the school

School-based vs. Independent Evaluation

Independent evaluations are paid for by the student's family OR in some cases by the school district

- Can be quite costly (>\$2,000)
- Can be done at any time, and results do not have to be shared with the school
- If results are shared with the school, the school must **consider** the results and recommendations, but are not obligated to implement them
- School districts will pay for an independent evaluation if they deem it is needed, or in some cases if the family does not agree with the school's evaluation and requests an independent evaluation

Summary

- The purpose of special education evaluations is to determine the presence or absence of a disability, as defined by IDEA and state regulations
- The evaluation process begins with written parent consent, then evaluators have 60 days to complete assessments, and concludes with a team meeting to determine eligibility and write an IEP if needed
- School psychological evaluations vary depending on suspected disability, but reports typically include the same components
- Evaluation results give a picture of current student functioning and help identify needed supports
- Evaluation results help determine if a student has a disability that adversely affects academic performance and necessitates special education

Helpful Websites

- [understood.org](https://www.understood.org)
- [nasponline.org](https://www.nasponline.org)
- [nclld.org](https://www.nclld.org)
- cec.sped.org/Tools-and-Resources/For-Families
- parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center
- thearc.org

Questions?

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