

Evaluating Learning Difficulties

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Evaluating children's learning styles and difficulties can help parents determine whether they need special education services or other support to be successful in the academic environment. Often, learning difficulties are first identified in the early elementary school years, when a child may be somewhat behind her peers in terms of learning the basic academic material. However, this is not always the case. Intelligent children, who have been able to use compensatory strategies to learn within the classroom in the early academic years, can begin to display learning difficulties as the academic material becomes more complex and their strategies are not as effective as before. In either case, school professionals may recommend that parents arrange for a psychoeducational evaluation or a comprehensive evaluation to more fully examine their child's strengths and weaknesses and see if there are any issues with processing information. This evaluation results in a psychoeducational report, which examines the cognitive abilities, information processing styles and the level of academic achievement to determine if a variety of learning problems, attention issues or social/emotional difficulties are present. The specific tests or subtests are often related to the presenting difficulties and the age of the person evaluated. Based on the results of this evaluation, recommendations are made for strategies that can improve the child's academic and life success.

Conducting the Evaluation

This type of evaluation can be conducted by members of a multidisciplinary team consisting of a psychologist and educational diagnostician. The psychologist evaluates the child's cognitive skills or aptitude, information processing style and social-emotional factors that can relate to academic functioning. A battery of tests administered to the child and questionnaires completed by the child, her parents and her teacher are used to fully examine all aspects of functioning. The educational diagnostician typically will examine overall academic skills (reading, math and written language), phonological skills and oral-language skills. A battery of tests is used to determine the level of functioning in each academic area.

These professionals work together to produce a comprehensive evaluation report outlining the factors underlying learning difficulties.

When a child is referred for an evaluation, the psychologist will typically begin by conducting a thorough clinical interview with the parents to gain information related to birth and developmental history, family history and the parents' perception of their child's strengths and weaknesses. The psychologist also conducts the intellectual assessment. Intelligence testing involves examining a child's capabilities in several broad areas: verbal skills, nonverbal skills, processing speed and working-memory skills. Within each of these broad areas, there are specific subtests that evaluate various components of the overall skill area (i.e., in the verbal area, verbal reasoning and the ability to verbally express factual information are assessed; within

the nonverbal area, visual attention and pattern analysis are evaluated).

Examination of the pattern of scores between these broad areas – and within each area – provides the first look at a child's strengths and weaknesses and offers a general overview of her aptitude level and capabilities overall and within the specific areas. The second battery of tests administered by the psychologist examines a child's information-processing skills, including auditory processing, visual processing, cognitive fluency and executive functioning skills. Children with cognitive-fluency problems may be able to determine the correct response, but they may need more time to process the question and their answer.

Visual-processing problems may affect a child's ability to analyze graphs or other pictorial supports. She may lose her place when reading or may misread operation-

al signs on math problems. Again, examination of the pattern of scores provides valuable information related to a child's difficulties within the academic environment.

Oral language skills refer to a child's ability to attend to, listen to, comprehend and retain information presented auditorally. Children with problems in this area may repeat directions out loud, require that instructions be repeated or ask questions about task demands. They may also have difficulty sequencing the order of instructions or separating essential from nonessential material. Weaknesses in short-term memory can make it difficult to keep all relevant information in mind at one time. It can be difficult to determine if an individual does not have the skills to complete the task or if the difficulty is with processing the expectations of the task. An evaluation of this area often clarifies where

the problems lie. Given that social/emotional factors can influence a child's ability to perform well in school, questionnaires and projective techniques are often used to evaluate more fully this aspect of functioning. If a child is experiencing anxiety, she may not be able to attend to the instructional material being presented, and thus may be falling behind in school due to the emotional distress that is impacting her attentional capacity.

Reading Evaluation

One of the primary reasons for a referral for a psychoeducational evaluation is a child's difficulty in the area of reading. Preschool and elementary school-age children may not understand how to match sounds with individual letters or patterns of letters. This skill – being able to match sounds with

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- Be medically healthy
- Have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

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letters – is referred to as phonological processing. Deficits in phonological processing skills can affect the ability to read words (“decoding”) and to write words (“encoding”). Phonological skills are the best predictors of how well a child will learn to read. Without these skills, it is very difficult to comprehend oral and written reading material. Teachers may also suggest a referral for a reading evaluation if the child has good basic reading skills (i.e., can correctly decode the words) but is having a hard time understanding what the written material means or accurately interpreting and responding to questions based upon books or stories she has read. This is referred to as reading comprehension. Some difficulties that can affect reading comprehension include trouble retaining the information in short term memory long enough to process all relevant information, difficulty mentally organizing the material to answer questions about the content of the material and difficulty conceptualizing the information presented in written format. Achievement testing evaluates the child’s level of reading fluency, which refers to the speed of reading either simple sentences or complex stories. These areas – decoding and encoding of words, reading comprehension and fluency – are assessed to determine the child’s strengths and weaknesses.

Math Evaluation

Approximately six percent of children classified as having learning disabilities have significant math deficits, and arithmetic difficulties can be as pervasive as reading problems. An educational diagnostician can measure the child’s level of mathematical achievement to help determine if a mathematics disorder is present. Academic achievement in math is associated with the child’s ability to compute basic arithmetic operations, perform math facts quickly and use logical reasoning to respond to math word problems. A slower rate of responding to basic addition and subtraction facts is often a signal of math difficulties. Individuals who have difficulty with basic math facts may count their fingers or use pencil marks, and they seem unable to develop efficient memory strategies.

Another indicator of difficulties with math is inconsistent calculation of numbers; this can

occur because of confusion in operational signs, difficulty appropriately borrowing or carrying numbers and/or mis-sequencing the steps when computing math operations. Individuals with reading comprehension or auditory comprehension can have trouble translating word problems into arithmetic form, identifying or applying formulas and comprehending written conceptual material. A psychoeducational evaluation will examine a child’s math fluency, ability to perform basic arithmetic calculations and the ability to solve math word problems.

Written Expression

Written expression is the third academic area assessed in a psychoeducational evaluation. Problems with written language are noted around the third grade when writing demands increase in school. Several areas are evaluated when a child presents with writing problems. First, the child is required to write sentences in response to an oral instruction with these items often having a visual component. In this structured activity, the child must appropriately sequence words in a statement, respond accurately to the given direction and include all of the basic sentence components to express a clear thought. Difficulty with spelling sight words and matching sounds to letters may also be evident in this assignment, but these errors are not always penalized. Another aspect of written expression includes how quickly the child can write simple sentences, reflecting writing fluency. A thorough evaluation of spelling – or encoding – skills is also accomplished by asking the child to write a series of increasingly complex words presented auditorially.

Older children who present with written language difficulties can be asked to write a complex story in response to a visual prompt, such as a picture. Writing more complex stories involves the coordination of many abilities, including processing visual information, organizing the written work, using age-appropriate vocabulary and spelling, applying knowledge of correct sen-

tence structure and constructing a fluid theme. Difficulties in any of these areas can affect the child’s ability to successfully comply with the task demands. At times, children are referred for an evaluation because they are able to successfully verbalize all information needed to create complex material, but they have a hard time translating their thoughts into written language.

Psychoeducational testing can provide a wealth of information about a child’s functioning. Recognizing her capabilities can lead to the presentation of more appropriate instructional material and, therefore, to an increase in academic achievement. Increased knowledge of her specific strengths and weaknesses provides teachers and parents information so that behavior and achievement can be better understood. Such an evaluation can also suggest other areas needing more comprehensive evaluation, such as an ophthalmologic evaluation or speech and language evaluation. Determining the factors underlying a child’s learning difficulties allows those who are working with her to implement strategies to account for all relevant factors. Often, multiple interventions, accommodations or strategies are needed to help a child overcome



the factors impacting her academic performance. A comprehensive evaluation is essential for students and parents to best understand the pattern of strengths and weaknesses, and to determine what is required for the child to be more successful at school, work and in life.

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