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What is a Psychological Assessment?

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Someone once said, "I took an IQ test and the results were negative." But, what is an IQ test and how are the results used? There is much mystery surrounding psychological testing and what the results might mean.

A huge variety of tests covers the entire range of human functioning. Tests measure intelligence, personality, job aptitude, mood problems like depression and anxiety, neuropsychological functioning, language skills, school achievement, and aspects of health and well-being.

The assessment process works best when someone asks a psychologist a specific question or questions that they want answered. This article will focus on issues around children's learning and behaviour.

Parents often express concerns about their child's performance in school. They worry that their child is not learning up to their potential. They want to know why. The two general reasons that children have problems are learning disabilities and behavioural issues. In a first interview with a child's parents, a psychologist will often ask a number of questions. This will help to determine which area may be the source of a problem.

If the child's history and development seem to rule out behavioural issues, the focus will turn to learning and intelligence. Psychologists are qualified to conduct a psychoeducational test battery. This battery will usually include the WISC-IV and the WIAT-II. These two tests are commonly used to assess children's intelligence and achievement.

The WISC-IV is the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 4th Edition. It is the most widely used measure of intelligence and the results are commonly called an Intelligence Quotient or IQ. The WISC-IV is a measure of a child's cognitive or thinking ability. It best predicts how well a child will do in school. The higher the score, the better the child is expected to do in school. The WIAT-II is the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, 2nd Edition. It is an individually administered test of school based achievement that assesses the child's skill level in reading, mathematics, written language, and oral language.

Each of these tests is administered by a psychologist on a one-to-one basis with the child. Each test has a number of subtests that provide information about the full range of a child's thinking and learning ability.

Once the results of these tests are obtained, a child's performance is compared to other children of the same age or grade level. One way of determining whether a child has a learning disability is to look for

differences between their ability and their achievement. A child with average or higher than average intelligence (i.e., WISC-IV) but below average achievement (i.e., WIAT-II) may have a specific learning disability.

If it is still not clear why a child has a specific problem, further assessment may be recommended. Tests that assess memory or neuropsychological functioning may provide helpful information. Auditory processing is another area that can cause learning problems and it should be part of a comprehensive assessment. In general, the goal of assessment is to determine if there is a problem, to identify the problem, and to provide a plan for remediation.

Another common cause of problems in school is behaviour. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one such problem. It affects between 7% and 17% of school age children. In contrast to what was previously believed, up to 70% of those identified as having ADHD as children continue to have symptoms in adulthood. ADHD can cause significant impairment in learning for the child with the disorder. It can also be very disruptive for other children in the affected child's classroom.

As well as learning problems, children with ADHD often have difficulty making and keeping friends. Children with ADHD are typically impulsive. They have a hard time waiting their turn. They may make other children uncomfortable with their demands. They engage in more risk taking than other children and may even scare their peers.

Assessment of these issues includes an interview with the child, parent, and possibly the teacher. The child, parent, and teacher will be asked to complete questionnaires that ask about the child's behaviour in different settings. In testing for ADHD, a computer-based test of attention skills is often used. The typical test measures the ability to pay attention, maintain that attention, and to control one's responses. This type of test is called a continuous performance test. It provides valuable information. In assessing for ADHD, it is also important to rule out auditory processing problems. Difficulty with auditory processing can lead to both attention and reading problems.

As part of a complete assessment, it is important to use tests that look at a child's emotional well-being. Both depression and anxiety, for example, can interfere with a child's academic and social behaviour.

Most psychologists agree that problems should be identified as early as possible so that appropriate solutions can be found. Like a medical condition, early identification and treatment not only alleviate unnecessary suffering but can prevent even more serious complications.

The author is a Registered Psychologist. Questions or comments about this article or ideas for future articles can be emailed to drshred@waterman-associates.com.