



Diagnosing & Evaluating Autism: Part 2

It is essential that the process of diagnosing Autism & Related Disabilities include the assessment and evaluation of an individual's development, communication, and social skills.

Knowing a procedure's purpose and limitations can help you understand the results more accurately. Usually, professionals assessing children with developmental disabilities look to answer questions such as: What areas of development are affected? Can a specific disorder be recognized? What intervention approaches will be most effective?

Evaluation and assessment are ongoing processes. Once a diagnosis has been determined, this process should be repeated periodically to track changes in an individual's level of functioning and to be sure that the individual's needs and opportunities are being optimized.

Part 2 of this fact sheet includes brief descriptions of some assessments, evaluations, and instruments administered to individuals suspected of having autism or a related disability.

Direct Observation

Direct Observation, Interaction, & Interviews Assessments: Information about a child's emotional, social, communication, and cognitive abilities is gathered through child-directed interactions, observations of the child in various situations, and interviews of parents and care givers. Parents and family members should be actively involved throughout these assessments.

What actually occurs during a specific assessment depends on what information parents and evaluators want to know.

Examples:

Functional Assessments aim to discover why a challenging behavior (such as tantruming and head banging) is occurring. Based on the premise that challenging behaviors are a way of communicating, functional assessment involves interviews, direct observations, and interactions to determine what a child with autism or a related disability is trying to communicate through their behavior.

Once the purpose of the challenging behavior is determined, an alternative, more acceptable means for achieving that purpose can be developed. This helps eliminate the challenging behavior.

Play-based Assessments involve adult observation and partial participation in structured and unstructured play situations that provide information about a child's social, emotional, cognitive, and communication development. By determining a child's learning style and interaction pattern through play-based assessments, an individualized treatment plan can be developed.

Standardized Instruments

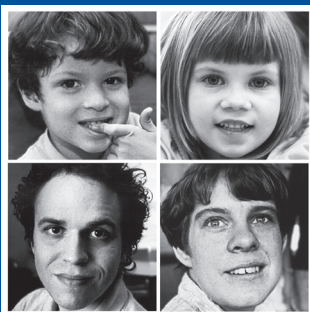
Standardized Instruments are formal methods used to determine different levels of cognitive development. Sometimes when a disability is so significant that it affects an individual's ability to speak, gesture, or move, special adaptations or modifications to existing standardized instruments will be necessary to get an accurate picture of an individual's abilities.

Examples:

Rating Scales & Developmental Inventories - Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales, Autism Behavior Checklist, Childhood Autism Rating Scale, and Batelle Development Inventory are examples of standardized tests that measure a child's general developmental skills including socialization skills and coping skills. Scores are based on parent interviews and evaluator observations.

Intelligence Tests (IQ) - Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised, and other intelligence tests attempt to determine an individual's intelligence based on standardized criteria. Scores are highly based on an individual's communication skills, social skills, and ability to accomplish specific tasks. These tests do not necessarily measure a child's true abilities, capacities, and unique potential to learn.

RELATED DISABILITIES



The Results

Testability: Many times professionals label a child as “untestable.” This can not be considered an accurate assumption.

Individuals with autism and related disabilities may seem uncooperative, stubborn, or withdrawn while in fact the way a test is presented can be too difficult or complicated for them to comprehend.

In addition, the individual may not understand the language or expectations of the test which can cause confusion and problem behavior.

There are various ways that professionals can adapt a test to try and make it easier for an individual to understand.

Asking Questions: Some parents, especially those who have recently learned that their child has a disability, may feel inadequate when hearing test results. It could be because of their lack of experience and knowledge or because of a professional’s manner. Remember this is your child. You have the right to ask any questions you want. Asking questions is your first step in beginning to understand more about your child. Learning as much as you can, can have a profound effect on your child’s future.

The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities

The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) seeks to provide support and assistance with the goal of optimizing the potential of people with autism, dual sensory impairments, and related disabilities. Located at six university sites throughout Florida, CARD develops programs offering support and training for individuals, families, professionals, and peers throughout Florida. This fact sheet is made possible through the cooperative efforts of Florida’s CARD Centers.

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