

Excerpt from “Assessing Children for the Presence of a Disability Putting It All Together: Interpreting Results and Summary”

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)

The interpretation of assessment results relies greatly upon the skills and experience of the individuals involved in the assessment process and the degree to which they work together as a team, pooling findings and discussing implications in a multidisciplinary way. All professionals responsible for any aspect of the assessment should prepare a written report on their findings or be prepared to present this information orally at the meeting where eligibility is determined or the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed. The report should not merely state the student's raw or derived test scores or the statistical quantification of observed behavior (e.g., x number of "out-of-seats" in y minutes), but should extend to the implications that can be drawn from the scores or behavior. The educational recommendations and insights of the professional should also be included. It is very important that each report be stated in a way that allows others on the team, including parents and teachers, to understand what was found, what the results mean, and what the professional recommends. The use of specialized, technical vocabulary -- jargon -- often obscures meaning and should be avoided or explained in lay terms.

Data gathered from all assessment procedures then need to be related and synthesized. When the team looks individually and globally at information gathered from observations, previous school experiences, review of prior records, tests, interviews, daily work assignments, and so on, what picture emerges of the student's areas of strength and need? What information appears to be contradictory? Where is more information or detail needed about the student to assist either in diagnosis or in instructional planning?

Interpretation of results, then, should not end with the statement, "No, this student is not eligible for special education" or "Yes, he or she is eligible." The data need to be directly useful to the educational team in identifying the specific areas in which the student needs special instruction or accommodation (or, at the least, the areas in which additional evaluation or diagnosis is necessary) and in suggesting what type of instruction or educational program might be appropriate.

Assessment is a complex process that needs to be conducted by a multi-disciplinary team of trained professionals and involve both formal and informal methods of collecting information about the student. While the team may choose to administer a series of tests to the student, by law assessment must involve much more than standardized tests. Interviews of all key participants in the student's education and observations of student behaviors in the classroom or in other sites should be included as well. To develop a comprehensive picture of the student and to develop practical intervention strategies to address that student's special needs, the team must ask questions and use assessment techniques that will help them determine the factors that are facilitating -- and interfering with -- the child's learning. Ecological assessment, dynamic assessment, curriculum-based assessment, learning styles inventories, and other less traditional approaches may be particularly helpful in answering such questions.

It is also important that assessment be an ongoing process. The process begins even before the student is referred for formal evaluation; his or her teacher or parent may have noticed that some aspect of the student's performance or behavior is below expectations and, so, requests an official assessment. After eligibility has been established and the IEP developed for the student, assessment should continue, through teacher-made tests, through ongoing behavioral assessment, or through incorporating curriculum-based assessment or task analysis into the classroom. This allows teachers and parents to monitor the student's progress towards the goals and objectives stated in his or her IEP. Thus, assessment should not end when the eligibility decision is made or the IEP is developed; it has great value to contribute to the daily, weekly, and monthly instructional decision-making that accompanies the provision of special education and related services.