NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Psychological Tests:
A Handout for Parents

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Overview

When their child is referred for a "psychological evaluation," parents may be upset, confused or worried. It is important to remember that a referral to a psychologist for an evaluation merely means that you or your child's teachers need more information in order to better understand how to help him or her achieve success at home or at school. If your child is referred to a school psychologist for testing at school, you must give your permission before any testing can begin. It is important that parents understand *why* testing is requested, *what areas of learning and development* will be addressed by testing, *what types of tests* will be given and by whom, and *how the test results will be used* to help your child. You may be invited by the school to a conference to discuss the referral or you may request a meeting with the teacher, psychologist and other personnel. You and your child will benefit most from testing if you feel fully informed and trust the professionals involved.

Parents sometimes worry that their child will react negatively or fearfully to testing. If you are comfortable with the testing plan, you will be able to convey your comfort and support to your child. Most children actually enjoy the individual attention they receive through testing, and many find the tasks to be fun and challenging. Children who tend to be wary of new situations will perform better if they have a chance to meet the psychologist prior to formal testing, and if they have a chance to discuss the reasons for testing and expectations for their performance. Children need to understand that parents and teachers only expect them to "do the best you can" and that they can not "fail" these tests.

What kinds of tests will be given to my child?

A good psychological evaluation uses several different methods to obtain information about your child, rather than relying on *one* test or *only* tests. Procedures may include observations in the classroom, information from teachers, parents and school or health records, as well as specific tests. Tests generally can be categorized as follows:

1. **Screening versus diagnostic tests:** *Screening* tests are brief and help provide a general picture of a student's skills or behavior but do not provide in-depth information. They are used to determine if additional testing in a given area is needed. *Diagnostic* tests are longer and provide more detailed information about a specific area, such as intelligence or reading or behavior problems. These are used to determine specifically how well your child performs, where your child is having difficulty and what instruction or support is needed to help your child.

2. **Norm-referenced versus criterion-referenced tests:** *Norm-referenced* tests compare your child to other children of the same age or grade level, usually on a national or regional level. Results indicate how far above or below "average" your child is functioning in a given skill or behavioral area. Most norm-referenced tests used by psychologists are "standardized" — they have been commercially developed using large numbers of children and are administered and scored in a standard fashion to assure consistency in results. The "norm" (point of reference) used is based on the population of students used by the test publisher to develop the test and to determine how typical children perform. *Criterion-referenced* tests compare your child's skills to a specific level of performance — they measure what has been learned. For example, in testing math skills, a criterion-referenced test might identify how many basic math facts 1-10 your child has learned. There are many published criterion-referenced tests, but teachers and others will often develop such tests based on the materials they use for instruction in their classrooms.

What tests will the psychologist give to my child?

Psychologists use a variety of tests which most often are diagnostic and which may be either norm-referenced or criterion-referenced. The most common types of psychological tests include:

- **Intelligence tests**: Popularly called "IQ" tests, intelligence tests are norm-referenced, standardized, diagnostic tools which very broadly measure traits which predict academic success. There are many different theories and definitions of "intelligence," but the tests most commonly used by psychologists in schools and clinics generally provide an overall score or estimate of "ability" to learn what is typically taught in school. These tests often include a combination of "verbal" (language-based) tasks such as vocabulary and general fund of information and "performance" (nonverbal) tasks such as puzzles and copying patterns. Intelligence tests have become controversial because ethnic and linguistic minority individuals tend to score lower than individuals from white middle class backgrounds and are not usually well-represented in the norming populations used by test publishers. Results should therefore be interpreted cautiously. Commonly used tests include the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (Third Edition), Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children, Stanford-Binet (Fourth Edition) and Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-educational Battery.

- **Achievement tests:** These tests, both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced, measure basic academic skills and content area information acquired through schooling. Psychological evaluations will likely consider specific basic skills needed to master reading, math and written language tasks in order to help identify where instruction needs to be provided or modified. Commonly used achievement tests include the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-educational Battery: Tests of Achievement, Kaufman Tests of Educational Achievement, Key Math and Peabody Individual Achievement Test.

- **Behavior inventories:** These are usually checklists or rating scales completed either by the child about his or her own feelings and behavior, or by a familiar adult (parent or teacher) who has observed the child's behavior in different situations. Some rating scales are norm-referenced and standardized, while others are criterion-referenced and identify "critical" concerns or serve as screening tools to determine the need for further testing. These tools can show how a child's behavior is perceived in different settings by different individuals, or how a child perceives his or her own behavior compared to the perceptions of others. These procedures can provide very valuable information, but they have some drawbacks: The results are only accurate if the child or adult is able to honestly respond to the questions asked; it can be confusing if different individuals rate behaviors of the same child quite differently. Commonly used examples include the Behavior Assessment System for Children and the Child Behavior Checklists.

- **Personality tests:** Tests which measure personality traits and emotional adjustment include both straight- forward questionnaires and more subjective "projective" procedures. *Diagnostic interviews* and *questionnaires* involve directly asking children about their feelings in specific situations, about their fears and concerns, etc. *Projective tests* include a variety of procedures which *indirectly* evaluate feelings and personality characteristics by providing the child with vague or ambiguous situations, pictures, stories, etc. and considering the responses as indicators of underlying personality traits, fears, anxieties and life stressors. Drawings by the child can also be used in this manner. Interpretation of projective tests is far more subjective than interpretation of direct questions and behavior inventories. Some commonly used personality tests include the Minnesota Multiphasic Inventory-Adolescent Form (MMPI-A) and projectives such as the Rorschach (inkblots) and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT).

Additional resource for parents

National Association of School Psychologists (Martin, M. & Waltman-Greenwood, C., Eds.) (1995). *Solve your child's school-related problems.* New York: HarperPerenniel.