



When is the Right Time to Seek an Assessment?

Part 1: Preschool through early Elementary School

by Karen Dearing, Ph.D.

Many parents struggle with the question of when to invest the time, energy, and finances to seek an assessment for their child. This two-part series will first talk about the various types of assessments and then discuss a variety of “red flags” that parents can be on the lookout for when considering whether or not to seek an assessment for their child. This article will cover preschool through early elementary school-aged children; part two will discuss later elementary school through high school.

So what are Psychoeducational Evaluations?

Everybody has strengths and weaknesses in their cognitive and academic skills, and in some individuals, those strengths and weaknesses are pronounced enough to cause difficulty in traditional learning. Psychoeducational evaluations assess a student’s cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses as they relate to traditional academic learning.



Cognitive testing typically covers intellectual reasoning skills and processing skills such as memory, attention, and auditory and visual processing as relevant. Academic testing targets progress in reading, writing, and math, as well as specific processing skills relevant to particular areas of learning (e.g., phonological awareness for reading).

When a need is indicated, psychoeducational evaluations can also assess for the significance of social, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges, as difficulties in these areas can certainly affect learning.

Psychoeducational evaluations can identify:

- Specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia
- Processing disorders such as visual or auditory processing disorders
- Profile of strengths and weaknesses in executive function skills
- Disorders related to social, emotional, attentional, and behavioral development such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and mood and anxiety disorders.

While psychoeducational evaluations can screen for the presence of speech and language disorders, motor dysfunction, and sensory processing and/or sensitivity, assessment by a speech and language

pathologist or occupational therapist (motor, sensory) is needed to fully understand difficulties in these domains.

Timing is Everything

Now that you understand what psychoeducational evaluations are (and are not), when is it worth the time and financial investment to seek one?

The goal of any assessment is to identify a student's profile of cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses in order to provide guidance on learning strategies and supports that will be most useful to that individual. When present, diagnosis of specific learning disabilities, processing disorders, and other challenges that can significantly affect learning (e.g., ADHD, ASD, anxiety, depression) is possible.

Early Indicators of Later Difficulties

The rationale of when to test is based on knowledge of specific cognitive and academic milestones and developmental periods, as well as the vast research literature on learning disorders and accommodations indicating that early intervention and support (and therefore, early identification) is a key factor in how much improvement can be made.

It's hard to imagine that a pre-academic or Kindergarten-aged child might need a psychoeducational evaluation, but there are times when children in this age range can indeed benefit from one. While children this age have not, for the most part, yet learned to read and write, early signs of disorders that can have a significant impact on later learning can be observed at a young age.

For example, significant difficulty mastering the names of the letters of the alphabet, the sounds letters make, and how to draw letters and shapes (e.g., triangles, squares), despite repeated efforts to learn it

or do it, can be an early sign of dyslexia and/or dysgraphia, learning disabilities that affect literacy development.

Significant speech delays or articulation difficulties can also be a red flag for learning disabilities related to the development of literacy. Early intervention when a speech or pre-literacy concern arises is absolutely a critical factor in determining how much improvement can be made.



Signs of other conditions that can have a significant impact on later learning can also be observed in very young children. Extreme impulsivity and behavioral restlessness

can be early signs of ADHD. Delays in development of social relationships and social communication skills (e.g., age-appropriate joint play, eye contact, taking others' perspectives) can be early signs of a mild autism spectrum disorder. Early identification of these conditions through assessment can pave a smoother entry into school and help young students lay a solid foundation of academic skills, as parents and teachers will have advanced knowledge of how best to support such students and maximize their learning despite their social and/or behavioral challenges.

Onward to Early Elementary

In early elementary school, consideration of assessment is an upward extension of that for the younger child. Mastery of the basic skills of letter naming, letter sounds, and letter formation, but marked

difficulty with developing into a fluent reader and writer, can be signs of dyslexia or dysgraphia.



Significant difficulty with fluent reading can take the form of persistent errors when reading orally, considerable difficulty sounding out new words, and/or serious reluctance to read. Making transposition errors or letter reversal errors when reading words on a consistent basis past first grade is also a red flag for a possible learning disorder in reading or writing.

With writing, the focus is largely on spelling and handwriting. Marked difficulty with mastering sight word spelling, leaving out letters in words (especially vowels), sequencing letters in words in odd ways, and letter reversals are all no longer developmentally appropriate past first grade.

With handwriting, notable difficulties in letter formation, with spacing between or within words, or staying on the line when writing are all indications of graphomotor control challenges, which can seriously affect a student's writing development.

Atypical difficulty with number sense (what numbers mean and the relations between them) and with early mathematical concepts such as telling time or understanding money can be a sign of a learning disability related to math. Also, challenges developing fluency in math facts (e.g., fast math in addition, subtraction) can be a sign of a math disability or could be associated with a dyslexic profile.

Other Considerations

Beyond specific academic concerns, the behavioral, social, and emotional challenges associated with ADHD, ASD, and emotional disorders can absolutely have an adverse impact on learning. The associated attentional and regulatory challenges can seriously undermine how much a young student is able to absorb in the course of the average school day. These conditions tend to have more blanket effects on learning across academic domains, but are no less important to understand via assessment. The academic skills learned in early elementary school are the foundation for all future learning. When there are holes in this foundation because of attentional or regulatory challenges that interfered with consistent acquisition of information taught in school, substantial challenges with applied academics (e.g., reading comprehension, written expression, math reasoning, and problem solving) can come later.

Finally, one of the most important signs to a parent that an assessment is needed is when they see their child and student feeling the struggle. Consistent frustration with learning, reluctance in learning, and/or stress around learning are all indications that, no matter what the specific presentation, an assessment may be useful to help the student and his or her parents understand what challenges are (and are not) present, and how best to support that particular student.