



When is the Right Time to Seek an Assessment?

Part 2: Later Elementary through High School

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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 presents a variety of “red flags” that parents can look out for that may help them in their decision. Part one focused on preschool- through early elementary school-aged children; now, part two will discuss students in later elementary through high school.

To recap, 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 including executive function (EF) deficits, and disorders related to social, emotional, attentional, and behavioral development such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and mood and anxiety disorders.

General Indicators

Regardless of the specific challenge, the more severe learning disorders and mental health conditions that affect learning are often “caught” by school personnel and/or by parents by the middle of elementary school. However, more subtle learning challenges can make achieving up to one’s true potential challenging well beyond early elementary years.

As students transition into later elementary, middle school, and beyond, one of the most consistent triggers for an evaluation is when a student is experiencing significant frustration with, stress related to, or diminished confidence in school, despite working hard.



Also, students who sometimes appear to be “lazy” with respect to school are, more often than not, experiencing genuine learning differences or disabilities; their avoidance of schoolwork may serve as a means to cope with stress or frustration. In other instances, students may lack the coping strategies to effectively engage in school.

Ultimately, parents should be encouraged to “trust their gut” when it comes to their child’s learning challenges. Parents sometimes report that they have been told by teachers that an assessment isn’t necessary because their child is “on grade level” or “doing fine.” Learning is about more than just grades and benchmarks. The process and sheer effort that go into learning are also relevant, particularly as students advance in school.

A Critical Shift in Learning

In third grade and beyond, the focus of academic learning shifts from building a basic academic skill set (word reading, basic math functions and facts, and mechanics of written expression such as spelling and handwriting) to applied academic work, meaning reading comprehension, written expression, and math and number reasoning. If small holes in a student’s academic foundation have formed in early elementary school, the impact of these is often seen as difficulty when the applied demands of academic learning increase in later elementary school.

Specific Signs of Learning Disabilities

Signs of specific learning disabilities in reading, writing, and math for students in later elementary school and beyond are numerous. When a student is working hard and having any of the challenges noted below, and particularly if they are feeling the impact of those challenges in terms of their emotional reaction or self-esteem, an evaluation may well be warranted.



Signs of a dyslexic profile:

- Being a slow reader.
- Being a reluctant reader.
- Making word substitutions, reading errors, or other dysfluencies when reading aloud.
- Lingering letter or number reversals when writing.
- Spelling difficulties.
- Poor mastery of math facts.
- More difficulty with word problems in math than with calculations.

Signs of a writing disorder:

- Written output doesn’t match the sophistication of a student’s orally presented ideas.
- The process of writing seems to limit what is expressed.
- Poor mechanics in writing (applied spelling, inconsistent use of capitalization, punctuation).
- Handwriting characterized by uneven spacing, poor letter formation, and/or words that float above the line.

Note: As students’ writing skills develop through third, fourth, and fifth grades, most are able to improve the coherence and organization with which they are able to communicate their ideas. Difficulty doing so, despite quality instruction and effort, can be a sign of a writing disorder or an attentional or EF weakness.

Signs of a math disability:

- Struggles to understand concepts such as division, fractions, decimals, and percentages.
- Difficulty mastering math facts.
- Challenges with word problems.

Note: A tendency to commit small (unforced, “careless”) errors in math such as transposing numbers, placing decimals in the wrong place, and making calculation errors due to alignment can be signs of a math disability or potential writing disorder, visual processing weakness, or attentional issue.

ADHD, ASD, & Emotional Disorders

As was the case in early elementary school, 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. As academic demands increase, behaviors associated with ADHD that weren’t seen as problematic or interfering can lead to clearer functional impairment at this age. Many young children are highly active and cannot sustain focus and regulate behavior the way older children or adults can. However, by about third grade, the neurocognitive mechanisms for regulation are in place and the social expectations of classroom behavior are well understood by most children. Behaviorally, most children will no longer show consistent restless (leaning across desk, shifting in chairs, fiddling with objects) or impulsive (calling out, chatting with friends when the teacher is requiring attention) behavior that is more normative in the earlier years. Similarly, as academic material increases in complexity and quantity, most children will not have to exert notable effort to regulate and sustain attention.



Children who seem to struggle to meet the increasing behavioral and attentional regulatory demands of school may indeed be suffering from an attention deficit disorder. If similar challenges are observed in the home or extracurricular environments, this is particularly telling.

As academic demands increase and students transition from building basic academic skills to applied learning, generalization and inference tend to be specific areas of challenge for students on the autism spectrum. Individuals with ASD are often seen as very literal or “black-and-white” thinkers. Challenges with efficient retrieval of information and/or broad challenges with processing speed are also common. These qualities alone do not necessarily indicate the presence of ASD, but these, in combination with difficulty engaging with peers, reading social cues and signals, and “reading between the lines” in social interactions can certainly be indicators of a mild autism spectrum disorder that might not have been identified previously.

EF Weaknesses

As children enter middle school, all of the above markers continue to be relevant when considering whether an evaluation is warranted. Additionally, middle school places increasing demands on students’ executive function (EF) skills—time and task management, organization, planning, prioritizing, etc.—as they have to juggle multiple classes/teachers. These increasing demands can expose significant challenges with EF, which can stem from an attention deficit disorder or other social

or emotional issues or can occur as an isolated area of weakness. EF weakness often manifests as chronic procrastination, losing track of assignments and/or materials, failing to turn in assignments on time, poor time management and planning larger projects, and frequently feeling “caught off guard” by the expectations of teachers. Academically, EF weakness may be the culprit when challenges with applied academics (reading comprehension, written expression, math problem solving) are present but the basic skills (word reading, spelling and writing mechanics, math facts mastery and basic calculations) seem otherwise intact. For example, EF weakness is often at play when a student struggles to organize ideas in writing.

Considerations for High School Students

In high school and beyond, once again, all previously discussed signs of potential learning subtle challenges with learning that have not previously been identified as “issues” can become just that. Sometimes, especially bright students who have previously compensated for their learning differences by relying on intellectual strengths and memory will find that they can no longer bypass their difficulties in the face of increasing academic demands. Additionally, students prone to stress, worry, self-doubt, depression, or low frustration tolerance may find the academic demands of high school to be more than they can handle, and thus emotional adjustment becomes an increasingly important factor to consider.



Accommodations: Timing is Everything

Finally, the timing of standardized testing with respect to college entrance is a relevant consideration for determining when to schedule an assessment. At present, assessment documentation can be up to three years old for the Independent School Entrance Exam (ISEE) and the ACT, up to five years old for the SAT, and must be within the current or last academic year for the Secondary School Admissions Test (SSAT).

While the identification of a learning disability or other processing, developmental, or other mental health condition will lead to a call for academic accommodations, each standardized testing agency has its own review process. A request for accommodations on standardized tests does not guarantee that they will be granted. Many factors, including a documented history of disability and of accommodation in the school setting, are almost always necessary prerequisites. Individuals interested in learning more should review the excellent documentation provided on each testing board’s website.

While there are no hard and fast rules about documentation for accommodations at the college level, the one thing to keep in mind is that many colleges now want to see a particular test included in an assessment that can only be given after a student turns 16. As such, when the timing is not critical for assessment or reassessment, waiting until after the 16th birthday can eliminate the possibility of needing to complete additional testing when entering college.