

How to Get the Most From Your Child's Neuropsychological Evaluation

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Background

- Pediatric neuropsychologist
- Expertise in child developmental conditions including autism
- Early childhood through adulthood
- Director, Center for Assessment And Treatment (CAAT)
- No conflicts of interest

Outline

- What is a neuropsychological assessment
- Parent role and expectations in the assessment
- Neuropsychological assessments & IEPs
- Common questions & answers



What is a neuropsychological assessment?

- Comprehensive look at your child's thinking and problem solving
 - Skills and abilities linked to brain function
- Strengths and Weaknesses
- Etiology of challenges
 - Brain based or environmental
- Clarify diagnoses
- Progress monitoring
- Prognosis
- Guide treatment planning

What is a neuropsychological assessment?

- Broader than psycho-education or traditional psychological evaluations
- Usually includes
 - Cognitive (IQ)
 - Attention & executive function
 - Learning & memory
 - Social emotional screening (anxiety, depression)
- Might also include
 - Language
 - Core language
 - Pragmatic language
 - Fine motor
 - Academic achievement
 - Social
 - Temperament/regulation
 - Adaptive functioning

Does it matter where I get it done?

- YES!
- The scores are just part of the story
- Clinical interpretation and judgement are key
 - Experience and expertise
 - Knowledge of the specific condition
 - Behavior observations are essential
- Can they help with the IEP process
- Considerations
 - Is the clinician a good fit for your child's needs and circumstances
 - Logistics: Cost, Availability of appts

A note about insurance

- In Maryland, if there is not a qualified in-network provider, they have to cover for out of network
- If in-network provider waitlist is too long, you are permitted to go out of network
- This should be covered at your in-network co-pay

Neuropsychological assessment can be a therapeutic process

- How well do the test results and interpretation explain my child?
- Does it explain strengths and challenges?
- Insight and understanding reduces frustration, stress, trauma



When to consider a neuropsychological evaluation?

- Confusion about child's behavior and current strategies are not enough
 - Gap between effort and outcome
 - Lack of diagnostic clarity
 - Uncertainty about education or treatment plan
 - Assistance with treatment planning and prioritization
 - Major transition, e.g., changing schools, post-secondary planning
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How much can I trust the report?

- You are the expert about your child
 - Do you feel it captured your child's strengths and explain challenges
 - Does it feel complete/comprehensive in its explanation
- Will it predict future growth/needs?
 - Age
 - Unusual circumstances that interferes with learning/growing
 - Neurological condition
 - Access to appropriate education
 - Stress, trauma
 - Is there prior testing to establish a trendline
- What was the testing experience like for your child?
 - Mood, illness
 - Rapport with examiner

Limitations of neuropsychological assessment

- Limited ability to break test protocol
- There may not be a measure for a particular strength.
 - E.g., map reading, pattern recognition
- Capture abilities within areas of strong interest
 - E.g., exceptional organizational skills
- Might not capture abilities in real-world settings
 - Strengths under optimized conditions
 - Weaknesses in less supported settings
- Predicting future skills and abilities varies
- Can be mitigated by robust behavior observations!!!



Limitations of neuropsychological assessment

- Limited sensitivity at extremes (high and low)
- Limited tests available for non-English speakers
- May lack cultural sensitivity
- Lack of standardized data for non-binary, non cisgender individuals

Parent's role in assessment process

Parent's role in the assessment process

- Communicate to the examiner where you are in the process.
 - What are you worried about?
 - How much stress is there at home? school?
 - Try to provide a clear picture of your child – strengths and needs
- Clarity around goals and expectations of the assessment?
 - Better understand your child
 - Refine intervention strategies
 - More effectively advocate at an IEP
- Where are you in your child's journey
 - Is this your child's first evaluation?
 - Are you nervous about the potential findings?

Parent's role in the assessment process

- Ask lots of questions
- What are my child's key strengths
- What are the 3-5 key areas of concern that I need to prioritize
- What is the current bottle-neck that impact progress, learning, etc.

Neuropsychological assessments & IEPs

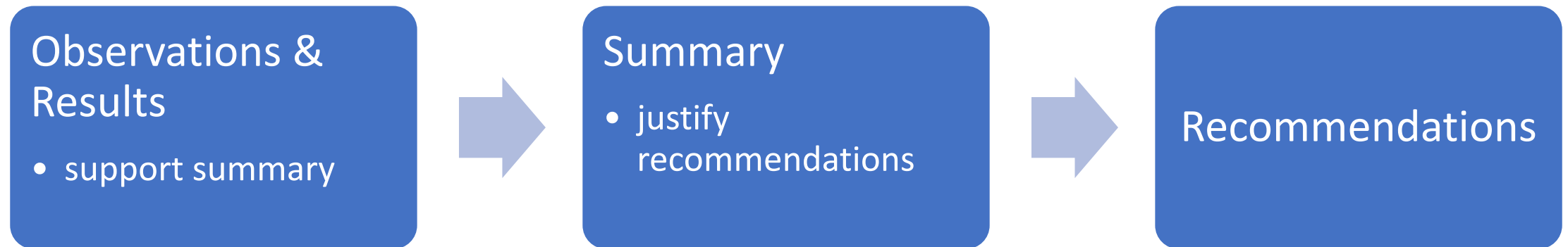
Structure of a report

Varies but should include

- Background
 - Reason for referral - why was the assessment done
 - Relevant history
- Behavior observations
 - What did the examiner observe during the assessment
 - How might that help explain findings
- Results
 - Test data
- Summary
 - Integrated explanation of strengths and needs
- Recommendations
 - School/academic
 - Home
 - Other
- Appendix
 - scores

Where do the recommendations come from

- Report should flow like a logical argument that explains your child's behavior.
- Based on a clear explanation of behavior (strengths and needs), the recommendations should logically follow.



What if my school won't implement a recommendation?

Why does my child need the accommodation/support?

- Is that reason presented in the report (background, results, summary)
- If not, ask the examiner to make it explicit
- Is this a key need?

Does the IEP reflect the area of need in the present levels and goals?

- If not, work to get that added in

If school still won't implement the recommendation

- Ask how they will address the need in the IEP

Example: Extended Time

- Report
 - Background: history needing more time to complete tasks
 - Slow to complete fine motor tasks, including writing
 - Results: test scores showing slow processing speed
 - WISC-5: Processing Speed Index
 - Achievement: slow reading fluency
 - More broadly, slow to complete timed tasks
 - Summary: explanation of how slow processing speed impacts function
 - “slow processing speed results in completing tasks that involve visual scanning or motor output very slowly, including reading, writing, and math computation.”
 - Recommendation: 50% extended time for [specify where it is needed]

Example: Extended Time

- IEP:
 - Present Levels
 - Relevant findings from teacher data and test results – needs more time to complete tasks
 - Include findings from neuropsychological evaluation
 - Accommodations
 - 1.5x extended time

Example: Speech Language Services

- Report
 - Background: history of language challenges
 - Results: test scores showing language weaknesses
 - Expressive Language
 - Language Comprehension
 - Impact on academics
 - Summary: illustrate how language weaknesses impact functioning at school
 - “Weaknesses in language comprehension impact CHILD’s ability to understand classroom wide instruction and reading comprehension.”
 - Recommendation: 1 hr week of speech language to address weaknesses in ...

Example: Speech Language Services

- IEP:
 - Present Levels
 - Relevant findings from teacher data
 - Relevant findings from school or other SLP testing
 - Include findings from neuropsychological evaluation
 - Goals
 - Improve receptive language
 - Improve reading comprehension
 - Supplementary Aids and Services
 - Speech language services

Additional Suggestions

- Before the IEP
 - Make a list of your child's key strengths and weaknesses
 - What are your primary goals
 - What are the top 5 accommodations/services your child needs
- Focus on these key things as you are discussing needs
 - Let that guide the rest of the discussion
- You are not likely to get all of the accommodations suggested in neuropsych – oftentimes that is ok

Additional Suggestions

- Provide tangible examples of the need from classwork and teacher reports
- Give illustrations of academic impact
 - What happens if not implemented?
 - Benefits in other settings when it was implemented
- Academic impact goes beyond reading, writing, math
 - Social emotional well-being
 - sensory processing
 - Social interaction and communication

Common Questions & Answers



Can testing predicting the future

Preschool → 6-18 months

Elementary school → 2-3 years

Middle school → 4-6 years

High school → long-term prognosis

Common Questions

- How often should I get testing?
- Why did my child's scores go up or down?
- How do neuropsych testing requirements change as children approach adulthood?
 - What is the best time for testing

Should I request a “school-report”

- It depends ...
- Goal: to find the right educational placement for your child.
- Usually, the full report is needed to “right-size” the setting and provide appropriate supports
- When to request school-based report
 - Sensitive history (family or otherwise) that is not pertinent to school setting
 - There are behaviors that might not ever show up at school (but could backfire – e.g., meltdowns at home after school could be “canary in the coal mine”)
- What about diagnoses?

How do I make use of school-based testing

- When school makes request to do testing, ask about scope and ask them to include anything you feel is missing
- Read it closely and ask lots of questions of the school psychologist
 - How will xxx weakness/need impact him in the classroom
 - Can you give me examples?
 - How can I use my child's strength in xxx to help overcome weakness in yyy
 - If something was invalid/not measured, ask them to try again with another measure
- Consider a consultation with a private neuropsychologist:
 - Supplemental testing
 - Interpretation/implications of test results

What is slow processing speed

- Input and output speed
 - Visual scanning and graphomotor (handwriting)
- Does not usually reflect thinking speed
- Impacts
 - Academic fluency (Reading, writing, and math)
 - Might impact language processing
- Recommendations
 - Extended time
 - Typing/notetaking support
 - Lead-time/wait time

What are organizational weaknesses

- Organization and tracking of stuff (backpack, room, desk at school)
- Organization of ideas and understanding how things fit together
- Impacts
 - Vulnerability to overload
 - Generation of ideas (including play)
 - Writing
 - Language organization (self-expression)
- Recommendations
 - Increased structure – checklists, chunking, calendar/planners
 - Create routines

Thank You



CENTER for ASSESSMENT
AND TREATMENT

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