

An Introduction to the Psychoeducational Assessment

[Narrator] A psychoeducational assessment is a rich and valuable tool for parents, but at first glance, it may seem intimidating. However, if understood correctly, this psychoeducational assessment or psych-ed can actually lead to more effective teaching methods and greater student success. On this journey we'll be breaking down the assessment into its five sections and taking you down the path of each. We'll start with what you should expect to see and why it matters to you as an educator.

[Colin] I think a psychoeducational assessment is a really important life event, and kind of educational career or educational journey of a child.

[Kristin] A psychoeducational assessment measures students' intellectual functioning, behavioral functioning, social-emotional functioning, adaptive skills, and academic abilities.

[Colin] It's really a moment in that journey when we have the opportunity to collect a lot of great, standardized information about how a student learns best.

[Suzanne] And our hope is that a psychoeducational assessment would tell you a student's strengths and weaknesses, how they learn best, and that it would yield some recommendations that the classroom teacher and the parents would find helpful.

[Narrator] It's not the responsibility of the classroom teacher to diagnose students. Only professionals with graduate degrees in psychology can perform a psychoeducational assessment. And while not all assessments look the same, they tend to follow a similar pattern.

[Kristen] So, generally speaking, you will have a referral question that needs to be answered and that will be stated. You'll have background information where you can

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collect historical data. You'll have an interview section about behavioral observations, a section for results, and a summary section that will then give you a clinical interpretation of those results, and a section of recommendations.

[Narrator] If a psych-ed assessment is done privately, it's up to the parents to disclose the results. However, if it's done through your school board and the parents agree, the information will be shared. You're tuned to recognize when a student isn't reaching their potential, but sometimes the solution isn't always black and white.

[Suzanne] Really, even just the term learning disability, it's helpful to a point, but then after that, you need to know what are the processing deficits associated with this learning disability. So my hope is that I can tell you this is the... These are the types of difficulties this student has. This is where his or her processing deficits lie. And so this is where you need to work around those. Here's some ideas to work around those processing deficits.

[Narrator] A psychoeducational assessment requires parent consent and typically starts with a referral from a teacher.

[Suzanne] And once they've sort of exhausted their bag of tricks and they're thinking, "I think this is more complicated" that's when they would refer to me.

[Colin] So these are the questions that our educators, and schools, school teams are asking of us about the child. So perhaps it's about how, why are they having such a difficult time learning math facts or, why they're having such a difficult time with reading comprehension, despite all these other strategies that we've tried in the classroom?

[Narrator] The referral and background section makes up the first of five assessment components in the report. Teacher involvement is especially important during this early stage.

[Kristen] When we're deciding about whether or not an assessment is a good idea, or if we need to have an assessment in order to better plan for a student. We're talking to teachers then.

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[Suzanne] And I would come in and ask them some questions. Look over some of the achievement testing they may have done.

[Kristen] So we want to know what their concerns are, how the student is coping in the classroom, how they present in the classroom. So we're getting their input at that point.

[Narrator] In this section of the report information about student health, developmental and family history can be found, as well as previous successful education strategies and report cards.

[Colin] Really getting a flavour for, again, the things that have happened in their life before that may be important information for us to know as part of their formulation. And increasingly, we're trying to highlight the types of interventions and supports that we've implemented along the way. So perhaps they've participated in a program, perhaps focus on reading in grade one or grade two. So what did that program look like? Did they make some of the expected gains that we would have thought through that type of program? And really importantly, you know, how does their participation in success or perhaps lack of success in that program, how does that inform our understanding right now?

[Narrator] A psychoeducational assessment can shed light on why a student struggles and provide realistic strategies for improvement. Knowing about where a student is coming from and other factors that may have an impact on their learning is extremely important in order to make an accurate diagnosis.

[Narrator] The next component you will see is the assessment section. This section walks you through how the assessment was completed. It may sound surprising, but many students actually enjoy and look forward to the testing.

[Kristen] The fact that it's one-on-one, they get to do something that they don't typically get to do when they're exposed to items and questions that you wouldn't get in a regular class.

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[Narrator] The goal is to assess students when they're at their best and not when they are fatigued or distracted. The assessment can be completed in a three hour session or over multiple sessions. It really depends on the student and their interest level.

[Kristen] So in those cases, you ask the student if they're interested in working a bit longer or working again in the afternoon, after a lunch break, for instance. And if they're, you know, all enthusiastic about doing it and they're, they're ready to go, then you would continue with it.

[Suzanne] But I'll always say to the student, if something fun is happening, then don't worry, you can do that and come back. You know, we can pick up after lunch. So maybe three hours with some breaks if the student needs it. If the student is very chatty, then we may have to break it into a couple of sessions.

[Narrator] In this section, you'll also find a list of assessment tools, measures, and questionnaires. These tools vary on a case-by-case basis and are selected based on what the referral question was.

[Kristen] So if a student has learning issues and social-emotional concerns as well, then we would make sure that we have assessment tools that will measure their cognitive abilities, their cognitive processing skills. But also then those social-emotional side as well. So we want to get a better sense of how they cope with various situations and their feelings around certain ideas.

[Narrator] Luckily for students, a psychoeducational assessment is not like a typical classroom test. It doesn't require any studying beforehand. It's a challenging activity for the student and psychologists to tackle together.

[Suzanne] And then when I meet with the student I say I'm like a detective. I'm the lady that Mrs. Smith calls when she's working with the student And she says, "You know, Suzanne, this student, when you talk to the student, you can tell they're really smart, but then they're having trouble with math or with reading or something like that." So they call

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me in, and my job is to see if we can figure out what's going on. So I want to know what you know and what you don't know, and how you solve problems that you've never seen before. And then they take all of that information. And I put it in a report for your mom and dad and your teachers. And our hope is that the report will help them help you better.

[Narrator] The Behavioral Observations and Impressions section summarizes how the student performed during an assessment and includes things like their response style, attention span, and feelings towards the assessment.

[Colin] What does the student look like working one-on-one with someone? What are some of the behaviours that we might see? What are some of the impressions of the assessor around their strengths and needs?

[Kristen] Were they impulsive with their impulse response style, or were they more deliberate and thoughtful? Did they take a long time? Did they use a trial and error approach?

[Suzanne] Was it easy for him to pay attention or did he need lots of breaks? I also might comment on their motivation. Is this a student who seemed very eager to please, or did they give up easily? Were they easily overwhelmed?

[Narrator] This section is crucial to the overall assessment because it determines the validity of the results.

[Suzanne] This is important because we need to know that we've got the absolute best out of the student.

[Kristen] This assessment really does represent the child's intellectual functioning at this point in time.

[Suzanne] So if I felt like a student maybe was giving up easily, they were very nervous I would stop and say, you know, I don't want to put anything in my report. That's not true. So I really need to know that this is the best you can do.

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[Narrator] The test results section includes scores achieved in areas such as reasoning and thinking ability, visual processing, memory, attention, and intellectual functioning. These results often display as standard scores, percentile ranks, or in descriptive terms like above average or below average.

[Kristen] A standard score will give you an idea of how that student is functioning compared to other students their same age. And the percentile rank tells you exactly where that ranking is. So for instance, if a student scores at the 25th percentile, that means if you had 100 students the same age as that student, they would score higher than 24 students and about 75 would score higher than they did.

[Colin] And I think what's really unique again, about this assessment, compared to a lot of our, perhaps, opinions and perceptions is that it is standardized. We're comparing these students to other peers of the same age to really get a picture of really the variability in their, in their strengths and their weaknesses that way.

[Narrator] One possible outcome of an assessment is the diagnosis of a learning disability or learning disabilities. The first time you'll come across a diagnosis is in this section. Only a psychologist or psychological associate registered with the College of Psychologists can make that diagnosis. And three specific criteria need to be met.

[Suzanne] So we need to know that a child has at least average intelligence somewhere. Then we will identify a processing deficit or several processing deficits. So that means there's a specific area of functioning that is significantly weaker than their overall intelligence. And then we also need evidence that they're achieving much below expectations.

[Narrator] The interpretation portion of this section takes those scores one step further, by telling teachers how the scores translate in a classroom setting.

[Kristen] So when I look at the pattern of scores and I put everything together, what does that all mean? And what does that... What is that profile consistent with? Does it involve a diagnosis of any sort? And also what do we do next?

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[Colin] Again, we'll be talking about how we arrived at that diagnosis or that formulation. And again, really linking that back to what does that mean for this child, moving forward in their education. What are the types of skills, strategies, really differentiating instruction methods we need to, kind of, call upon to best meet their needs?

[Narrator] We know you're busy, and while all parts of a psych-ed assessment are important, reviewing the entire document may not be feasible.

If you only had five minutes to review an assessment, the summary recommendation section should be where you start. It provides a general summary of how the student performed, where a child's strengths and needs are, and what should be done next.

[Colin] You're really going to get the bird's eye view of how this child learns best. So you're going to get a lot of descriptive language about the student's profile. Where are their strengths that we can maximize and focus on in the classroom? And where some of those needs that we really need to implement some supports and strategies to meet?

[Narrator] The recommendations portion of this section focuses on tips and action steps. It often provides recommendations for not only teachers, but parents as well. Having teachers and parents on the same page is important because it ensures consistency for the student.

[Kristen] What might be best for this particular student in the area of reading or writing or math? And it might also give you some ideas of how to tailor your lessons to help meet that student's needs.

[Colin] Perhaps we're thinking about text-to-speech type software that's doing that so that they can focus on comprehension and taking meaning from what is on the page or potentially, maybe we're thinking about accommodations and assistive technology recommendations about speech-to-text. Perhaps we're using the student's verbal strengths to really help articulate their ideas and get that, that information and their ideas out onto the page or out onto the computer that way.

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[Narrator] It is up to the classroom teacher to use a psychoeducational assessment and their update of a child's Individual Education Plan.

[Suzanne] Our hope is that once we've identified a student's strengths and weaknesses that we... That this information can be used to inform the Individual Education Plan as well. So if the student's language skills aren't as well developed, then that's a student who may rely more heavily on visual stimuli to help them.

[Kristen] So that ends up being really the... One of the big next steps, because those needs that the student has in order to access the curriculum need to be embedded back into the IEP. And so that with the IEP, then there becomes that obligation that those needs are going to be met.

[Narrator] Once the psychoeducational assessment is completed many boards schedule a feedback meeting with the parents to discuss the results and recommendations.

[Suzanne] And, I may meet with the parents alone for a few minutes just to review the diagnosis and answer any questions they have. Sometimes it's very emotional for parents, so we just want to do that in a small group. And then we invite the teachers in, to hear the results. And we'll take them through the whole report and answer their questions along the way.

[Narrator] Parents receive a copy of the assessment. One copy goes into the board's psych file and another into the child's Ontario Student Record. After that, no copies can be made without the parent's permission. And although psychological assessments are ideally completed at an early age, they are still incredibly useful as that child moves through the school system.

[Suzanne] So ideally the information contained in the report can help us now and several years in the future.

[Colin] Some of the academic needs may have kind of changed inform or in nature by that time. But some of the types of strategies that overall bird's eye descriptive information will be so helpful for that classroom teacher who's meeting that child on the

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first day in September and wondering about how do I best approach my instruction and my programming for the student, perhaps, who may have a learning disability?

[Narrator] For more information about psychoeducational assessments and how they can benefit you as an educator contact your board student services, or your local chapter of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario.

