

To Test or Not to Test: Addressing common parent concerns about psychoeducational assessments

By Karen Sabourin, Provisional Registered Psychologist

To test or not to test...this is a question many parents are faced with at some point during their child's journey through school. Whether the issue in question is a learning disability, AD/HD or giftedness, parents often report struggling with the decision of whether or not to have their child tested. As a parent who has personally wrangled with this topic, and as a provisional psychologist who is in the process of becoming qualified to administer psychoeducational assessments, I am perhaps uniquely positioned to speak to the issues for and against this kind of testing. However, before diving in, I will talk briefly about what a psychoeducational assessment is and why someone might want to consider having one done.

A good psychoeducational assessment will focus on how your child learns, not what he/she knows. This focus is what makes the process very different from the kind of test your child writes at school. The results allow the psychologist to identify your child's cognitive strengths and weaknesses. With this information, the psychologist can develop and recommend academic strategies that take advantage of what your child's brain naturally does well, making it easier and more enjoyable for your child to learn. Testing can also yield information to help confirm or rule out mental health diagnoses such as anxiety, and biological conditions such as attention disorders, that get in the way of learning.

So, why might a parent not want to do this for their child? While each parent's struggle with this decision is unique, most parents considering testing for their child report struggling with similar issues, including: cost of testing, concern for their child's self-esteem during and after testing, and concern for how the testing information will be used by others.

Why do Psychoeducational Assessments Cost So Much?

The cost of a psychoeducational assessment is in part created by the cost of the assessment tools used. The other part of the cost comes from the need for the overall assessment to be comprehensive enough that it isolates various cognitive functions, pinpointing both the strengths and weaknesses of the person being tested. Testing that is not comprehensive enough will not yield the information necessary to accurately understand why the child is struggling. Without proper isolation, the recommendations given may not be of any value to your child. So, while the cost may be daunting, the information that a good psychoeducational assessment can provide will save an enormous amount of frustration for the child, parent and teacher. It will pinpoint and provide strategies that make learning easier for the child. Parents are reminded that their health insurance will often cover a portion of the cost of testing.

Child's Self-Esteem/ How Will the Information be Used?

Many parents also report worrying about whether the testing process will negatively affect their child's self-esteem and whether the information will be used to single their child out in some way (e.g. diagnostic labels, IPP, medication, etc.). Parents are right to be concerned about these

things. However, what parents must keep in mind is that their child is also struggling without the assessment. To do nothing in the face of that struggle leaves your child in a position where they often come up with their own reasons for why they are struggling (e.g., I am not smart).

The reality is that the result of psychoeducational testing is often a diagnostic label for the child. While this is an imperfect system, the diagnostic label is a way of communicating a large quantity of information about your child's learning needs in a concise way. The downside is that this information has the potential to focus others' attention on your child's "problems" rather than on their strengths and unique characteristics. So much time and energy can get focused on the child's Individual Program Plan (IPP; the document created by the school that outlines personal goals and planned supports for the student) that who the child is can become secondary. While this can be an issue, parents must also consider that without a label, their child may be blamed for behaviours that are in reality a side effect of the way the child's brain works (e.g., adults conclude that the child is misbehaving, isn't trying, is lazy, etc.). These false labels (i.e., lazy, stupid, bad) cause significant damage to a child's self-esteem. Diagnostic labels, while complicated, can bring insight, awareness, understanding, and relief, as well as solutions for all involved. When parents and teachers work together to create an IPP based on the recommendations from a good psychoeducational assessment, the student is set up to show everyone what he/she is actually capable of. It then becomes the parent's job to help their child's strengths shine through. This balance between the IPP, a focus on strengths, and hard work provides your child a solid foundation for how to move forward as a learner for life.

The thing I worried about the most during the process of testing was giving others a simplistic shortcut for understanding and predicting what my child could and could not do. At the end of the day, what I know about my child is that given the opportunity and the right amount of encouragement and support, she will often amaze you. Who would know that a child who is sometimes paralyzed by anxiety in everyday situations would have a serious love for roller coasters? I do, because I work hard at not letting the label she was given get in the way of who she is as an individual. The thing I can tell you from the other side of the testing process is that it didn't take away her uniqueness for me, it actually added to it. I now have a greater understanding and appreciation for the way my daughter's brain and mind work. This has helped me to see that my daughter is at the same time strikingly similar to and yet totally different from me. As a result, some of the things she does that used to frustrate me no longer do. I find that I am able to respond more consistently with compassion and support rather than frustration because I have a clearer understanding of how she is unique. This has been one of the unanticipated gifts of the process for me personally.

I don't want to give you the false sense that once you have your child tested that all your troubles and frustration will be gone. This isn't the case. There will still be a lot of hard work to do. What testing will give you, when done properly, is a clear picture of what work needs to be done, and a step by step plan for how to proceed. And from my experience, this is a great place to start.

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