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ACTION
INFORMATION SHEETS

Evaluation: What Does It Mean for Your Child?

What is an evaluation?

Evaluation is the process for determining whether a child has a disability and needs special education and related services. It's the first step in developing an educational program that will help the child learn. A full and individual initial evaluation must be done before the initial provision of any special education or related services to a child with a disability, and students must be reevaluated at least once every three years.

Evaluation involves gathering information from a variety of sources about a child's functioning and development in all areas of suspected disability, including information provided by the parent. The evaluation may look at cognitive, behavioral, physical, and developmental factors, as well as other areas. All this information is used to determine the child's educational needs.

Why have an evaluation?

A full and individual educational evaluation serves many important purposes:

1. Identification. It can help identify children who have delays or learning problems and may need special education and related services as a result.

2. Eligibility. It can determine whether your child is a child with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and qualifies for special education and related services.

3. Planning an Individualized Education Program (IEP). It provides information that can help you and the school develop an appropriate IEP for your child.

4. Instructional strategies. It can help determine what strategies may be most effective in helping your child learn.

5. Measuring progress. It establishes a baseline for measuring your child's educational progress.

The evaluation process establishes a foundation for developing an appropriate educational program. The school must provide a copy of the evaluation report and the documentation of determination of eligibility to the parent. Even if the evaluation results show that your child does not need special education and related services, the information may still be used to help your child in a regular education program.

What measures are used to evaluate a child?

No single test may be used as the sole measure for determining whether a child has a disability or for determining an appropriate educational program for your child. Both formal and informal tests and other evaluation measures are important in determining the special education and related services your child needs.

Testing measures a child's ability or performance by scoring the child's responses to a set of questions or tasks. It provides a snapshot of a child and the child's performance on a particular day. Formal test data is useful in predicting how well a child might be expected to perform in school. It also provides information about unique learning needs.

Other measures of a child's growth and development, such as observation or interviews with parents and others who know the child, provide vital information on how the child functions in different settings and circumstances.

The school must conduct a full and individual evaluation consistent with the IDEA that uses information from diverse sources, including formal and informal data. Tests are important, but evaluation also includes other types of information such as:

- medical information
- comparisons of the child's progress to typical expectations of child development
- observations of how the child functions in school, at home, or in the community
- interviews with parents and school staff

As a parent, you have a wealth of information about the development and needs of your child. When combined with the results of tests and other evaluation materials, this information can be used to make decisions about your child's appropriate educational program.

What types of tests are available?

There are many types of tests that schools use to measure

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student progress. Here are a few important terms parents may need to know.

Group tests

Group achievement tests may not be used to determine eligibility for special services. They furnish information about how a child performs in relation to others of the same age or grade level, but they do not identify an individual student's pattern of strengths and needs.

Individual tests

Tests administered individually to your child can clarify the special education and related services your child needs to progress in school.

Curriculum-based assessments (CBAs) or curriculum-based measurements (CBMs)

These types of tests are developed by educational professionals to examine the progress a child has made in learning the specific materials the teacher has presented to the class. They can be useful tools for teachers and parents in determining whether learning is taking place, but they must never be used to determine eligibility for services.

Standardized tests

Standardized tests are rigorously developed by experts to be used with large populations of students. The tests are administered according to specific standards. Standardized tests can evaluate what a child has already learned (achievement), or predict what a child may be capable of doing in the future (aptitude).

Norm-referenced tests

Norm-referenced tests are standardized tests that compare a child's performance to that of peers. They can tell you where your child stands in relation to other children of the same age or grade.

Criterion-referenced tests

These tests measure what the child is able to do or the specific skills a child has mastered. Criterion-referenced tests do not assess a child's standing in a group but the child's performance measured against standard criteria. They may compare a child's present performance with past performance as a way of measuring progress.

What criteria are used in selecting tests?

Schools should look at many factors when selecting tests to use in evaluation. Here are a few:

- Tests must be reliable. A test is reliable if it offers consistent results when taken at different times and/or given by different evaluators. You should feel comfortable asking for the reliability of the tests given to your child if this information isn't discussed along with the test results.
- Tests must be valid. A test is valid if it actually measures what it was designed to measure. Tests must accurately reflect the child's aptitude or achievement level. Any standardized tests your child is given must have been validated for the specific testing purpose and administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel.
- Tests and other evaluation materials must not discriminate against a child on a racial or cultural basis. They must be administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication unless it is clearly not feasible to do so.
- Factors such as your child's attentiveness, motivation, anxiety, and understanding of the test directions can affect the score.

What is functional assessment?

While tests are an important part of a full and individual evaluation, sometimes what children can do or need to learn is not reflected in their scores. A functional assessment looks at how a child actually functions at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.

Functional assessment for some students includes looking at reading, writing, and math skills. For others, evaluating whether the student is able to ride the city bus, dress independently, or handle money might be more appropriate.

What is functional behavioral assessment?

When a child has behavior problems that do not respond to standard interventions, a functional behavioral assessment can provide additional information to help the team plan more effective interventions.

A typical functional behavioral assessment includes the following:

- A clear description of the problem behavior.
- Observations of the child at different times and in different settings. These observations should record (1) what was happening in the environment before the behavior occurred, (2) what the actual behavior was, and (3) what the student achieved as a result of the behavior.
- Positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports to address that behavior, and to teach behavior skills. Once the functional behavior assessment has been completed, the results may be used to write a

behavior intervention plan or to develop behavior goals for the individualized education program.

How are evaluation results used?

After your child's evaluation is complete, you'll meet with a group of qualified professionals to discuss the results and determine whether your child has a disability under IDEA. The school must provide you with a copy of the evaluation report and a written determination of eligibility.

If the team determines, based on the evaluation results, that your child is eligible for special education and related services, the next step is to develop an IEP to meet your child's needs.

The goals and objectives the IEP team develops relate directly to the strengths and needs that were identified through evaluation.

It's important for you to understand the results of your child's evaluation before beginning to develop an IEP. Parents should ask to have the evaluation results explained to them in plain language by a qualified professional.

You will want to request the evaluation summary report before meeting with other members of the IEP team to develop the IEP. Reviewing the results in a comfortable environment before developing the IEP can reduce stress for parents and provide time to consider whether the results fit their own observations and experiences with their child.

When are students reevaluated?

Students receiving special education services must be evaluated not more often than once a year, unless the parent and the local educational agency agree otherwise; and at least once every 3 years, unless the parent and the local educational agency agree that a reevaluation is unnecessary to make educational decisions.

The reevaluation will include a review of existing evaluation data, and information you provide, classroom assessments, and observations consistent with the IDEA. The IEP team then decides if any additional data is needed to determine if the child continues to have a disability and continues to need special education and related services.

If the IEP team decides no additional data are needed, you will be informed in writing that the team has sufficient information to determine whether your child continues to be eligible for special education and related services. At this point, the team is not required to conduct additional assessments unless parents or the child's teacher request them.

What questions should I consider when evaluation or reevaluation is proposed?

1. What tests and other evaluation materials are being considered for my child? Why? How will the information be used to plan my child's education?
2. Will the evaluator observe my child in the classroom and talk to my child's teachers?
3. Has the evaluator had experience testing children whose problems may be similar to my child's?
4. Will my child's disability interfere with obtaining valid test scores in any area?
5. Will a translator or an interpreter be available if my child needs one? Testing must be done in a child's native language or sign language if needed.
6. Is my child similar to the group on which the test was normed (the children used when the test was developed)? Is the person responsible for conducting the test familiar with my child's culture?
7. Will test scores be based on my child's grade or age? If my child was retained, how will that be considered in evaluating the test results?
8. What kind of information will I be asked to contribute to the evaluation?
9. What will be done to help my child feel comfortable during the testing session?

What if I disagree with the school's evaluation?

If you disagree with the results of an evaluation, you have the right to obtain an independent educational evaluation (IEE) at public expense. An IEE is conducted by qualified examiners not employed by the school. The school district must provide parents with a list names of possible examiners and provide the evaluation at no cost to the parents.

If the school district denies a request for an IEE at public expense, the district must initiate a due process hearing to show that its evaluation was appropriate.

When the school arranges for the provision of an IEE, the evaluation must be accomplished under the same criteria that the school district uses for its evaluations. The school may not unreasonably delay an IEE, and it must consider the results of the IEE when determining eligibility or developing your child's IEP.

If the result of the hearing is that the agency's evaluation is appropriate, you still have the right to obtain an IEE at your own expense. If the the IEE meets the school's criteria, those results, too, must be considered by the IEP team in

determining your child's placement and special education and related services.

When the IEE evaluation is complete, ask for a written report. Be sure that any recommendations for services or specific kinds of programs are in writing. When you receive the report, contact your child's school to arrange an IEP meeting.