

Identifying Students Who Have Exceptionalities

It is important to identify a student's learning needs to ensure that the right strategies and supports are put in place for them.

Sometimes children are identified as possibly having an exceptionality before they enter school, perhaps by their doctor, or by daycare or pre-school workers.

- ▶ Early identification of a child's exceptionalities can be very beneficial.
- ▶ If you have concerns while your children are young, do not hesitate to reach out for help.

Once a child is in school, teachers or EAs, based on their observations and/or student work in class, may suspect that a child or teen might have exceptionalities. In that case, the school may suggest further investigation to find out for sure.

- ▶ If school staff reach out to talk to you about your child's needs, try to listen calmly and thoughtfully. They should be focused on the best interests of you and your child.
- ▶ No one is to blame if a child has exceptionalities. All that matters is working together to make sure every student is successful.

What if you have concerns?

If you think your child or teen learns or behaves in ways that are different from other students their age, or if you think your child might benefit from alternate approaches, say something.

- ▶ If you have questions or concerns about how your child is progressing with their learning, their behaviour, or other aspects of their development, you can seek out advice and input.
- ▶ If you think your child is bored and needs more challenge, tell someone. Ask for input.
- ▶ All students are assessed regularly to determine whether they are performing at grade level. If your child's test results concern you, raise the issue with school staff.

- ▶ You can talk to your school's principal or teacher; they see your child frequently and observe them with other students. It is their job to help you and your child.
- ▶ If one is available, you might want to talk to a First Nations Liaison Worker or Home School Coordinator, or an Education Assistant or Learning Assistance Teacher you know well. People in those positions can help you understand what options are available to help you learn more about your child's needs.
- ▶ You can also talk to your family doctor.

You should never be embarrassed to discuss your child's needs and any issues that might worry you. All children are unique, and all children have varying strengths and challenges over time. Your child's teacher should be a valuable source of help. Together, you can think about why your child might be experiencing difficulties or doing things in unexpected ways.

It is important to remember that all students develop at different rates. Students of the same age are not always able to do the same things in the same way. For example ...

- ▶ Many young children struggle to use scissors, other small devices, or complicated toys.
- ▶ Some children will learn to ride a tricycle later than others.
- ▶ Some children might learn to tie their shoes when they are 3 years old. Others might not master that skill until they are 4, or maybe even 5!
- ▶ Young children often learn to make speech sounds at slightly different ages.

- ▶ It is important not to over-react to minor developmental differences too early.
- ▶ Professionals who work in health, early education, and schools are trained to watch children's development and make sure it is consistent with some general "milestones." Milestones are skills that are typical for children within an expected age range (such as age 5 – 7) – not at one specific age. Professionals can help think about whether children and teens are not meeting common milestones. If they are not, it can be a reason to investigate further, but it does not necessarily mean that there is an issue.
- ▶ In thinking about whether a student might have exceptionalities, professionals will consider whether a student demonstrates ongoing ("*persistent*") and serious ("*significant*") differences that are unusual for their age and level of development.

Similarly, if your child is working behind grade level, it does not mean that your child necessarily has an exceptionality. Other factors may be impacting your child's learning.

- ▶ Sometimes a student's diet, sleep habits, or routines might explain a student's challenges, and relatively simple changes might resolve issues. For example, a child who is overtired may not do well on tests, and an earlier bed-time may help.
- ▶ If a child or teen has missed a lot of school, that might be a reason for their achievement being a bit behind other students in the class.

- ▶ Talking with school staff and making some relevant adjustments in your child's home or school environment might be enough to resolve concerns.
- ▶ But if you cannot find another reason for your child experiencing ongoing challenges, you can expect your child's school to help you take further steps to better understand your child's needs.

Assessments

If families and school staff suspect that a student might have exceptionalities, it may be recommended that the student have a "formal assessment."

- ▶ This would be very different from other types of assessments used with all students in schools, like quizzes, tests, or exams. Those types of assessments are used to make sure students are learning the skills and knowledge that are expected at each grade level.
- ▶ A formal assessment of a student who might have an exceptionality is used to find out how the student learns, and what "interventions" (which might be strategies, supports, services, or therapies) will help the student meet their full potential.

- ▶ Not every child who has an exceptionality needs an assessment from a specialist. You and the school staff may be able to make plans to address your child's needs without any kind of "formal testing."
- ▶ But if more information is needed, an assessment can be helpful for planning the education program that is best for your child.
- ▶ *You should be asked to provide your approval before any formal assessment of your child takes place. You should also be involved in planning any related follow-up.*

Types of Assessments

Formal assessments are recommended for students for many different reasons. If an assessment is recommended ...

- ▶ It does not mean a student is bad or not smart
- ▶ It does not mean a student has a mental health issue
- ▶ It does not mean a student won't be successful

An assessment might be completed by a physician, an educational psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational or physical therapist, an audiologist, or some other individual who has been trained to understand students' development and health.

Some common types of assessments are described below.

What is an Educational Psychology Assessment?

Often called an "ed-psych" assessment, a psych-ed or a neuro-psych assessment, this type of assessment measures how a student thinks, how they learn, and how they are able to behave. Because our brains and our bodies are all unique, we all think, learn, and are able to control our emotions in different ways.

An ed-psych is simply a tool to better understand what a student does well, the things they find more difficult, and what strategies will help them learn and interact with others more easily.

Ed-psych assessments are implemented by psychologists.

- ▶ Psychologists are professionals who are trained in how the human mind works.
- ▶ Some psychologists specialize in understanding how students think and behave, and what types of supports can help students be successful in the school setting.
- ▶ Those psychologists are trained to complete ed-psych assessments.

Ed-psych assessments usually take place at school. The psychologist works in a quiet, private area where other students aren't around.

As part of an ed-psych assessment, the psychologist interviews the student's teachers, parents, and other people who work closely with the student, like Education Assistants or counsellors. During the assessment, the psychologist also observes the student completing tasks and taking part in activities that are appropriate for the student's age and development. This might be playing games, using toys, or working on puzzles.

It's important to be aware that an ed-psych assessment is designed to find the points where your child may be struggling. Your child may find it frustrating and overwhelming to take part in challenging activities that are intended to be beyond their capabilities. For this reason, some psychologists will complete ed-psych assessments over multiple days, to reduce any stress for the student.

What is a Speech Language Assessment?

Speech, language and communication skills are essential for daily life. These skills help students:

- ▶ participate in the school and classroom.
- ▶ be prepared for reading and writing.
- ▶ interact and build relationships with other students and adults.

Families, school staff, and specialists can all work together to address students' speech and language issues early. Doing so can lessen or eliminate the need for speech and language supports later in life.

In particular, speech language pathologists (SLPs), also known as speech therapists, are professionals who have been trained to help students with speech, language, and communication.

If a student is assessed, the SLP will usually begin by taking a few minutes to get to know the student. With young students, the SLP will often use age-appropriate toys or games to make the student feel more comfortable. The SLP will then use an assessment tool that is chosen to address the specific needs of each student.

Sometimes the SLP will start the assessment by examining a student's mouth. This is a quick and easy external examination. Sometimes children have physical features that impact on their speech – such as their tongue not moving in ways that produce clear speech. An SLP is trained to look for these types of issues.

The SLP will also use a variety of tests to help understand a student's challenges and needs. The tests will be chosen to match each student's age, as well as what the student finds easy and difficult to do. The tests are not used in a way that is stressful for students. For example:

- ▶ a student may be asked to describe pictures while the SLP writes down what they hear the student say.
- ▶ the SLP might ask questions to explore a student's language skills, often using fun activities so the student does not become bored or frustrated.

Throughout the assessment, the SLP will observe the student while they play with toys or games and during their school day (e.g. working in the classroom or playing on the playground). SLPs may also interview parents, teachers, or Education Assistants (EAs) to gather more information about the student's skills.

Depending on the results of the assessment, an SLP may continue to be involved in a student's education, helping to address any issues to help the student be successful.

What is an Occupational Therapy Assessment?

“Occupational therapy” refers to services that can promote better health, including preventing or helping people better live with an injury, illness, or disability. Occupational therapies are provided to a wide variety of students, including those who have physical challenges, differences in their learning or development, hearing or visual difficulties, or behaviour or emotional needs.

Early identification and interventions to address these issues can lessen or even eliminate the need for occupational therapies later in life.

Occupational Therapists (OTs) can help parents and school staff consider if students who are experiencing challenges in their schooling would benefit from a full occupational therapy assessment. As part of an assessment, an OT might:

- ▶ play with the student and get to know them in a friendly, stress-free way.
- ▶ review the student’s records and work samples.
- ▶ observe the student play, interact with others, and learn in typical school settings and activities.
- ▶ assess the school environment to identify any barriers that can be eliminated, as well as supports that might help the student play and learn more easily.
- ▶ interview the student, teachers, parents, and possibly service providers who are helping the student.
- ▶ assess the student’s skills and performance to suggest what might help the student function better at school and in the home.

Depending on the assessment results, OTs can suggest ways to help students build on what they do well and address any areas for development.

What is a Physical Therapy Assessment?

Physiotherapy (often referred to as physical therapy) refers to a range of treatments that are used to help restore, maintain, and enhance a person’s physical functioning and well-being. Physiotherapy services can be beneficial for helping people overcome a physical injury or access a variety of spaces and activities. Physiotherapy can also help promote overall health and fitness.

The professionals who provide these services are called physiotherapists (PTs). In schools, PTs can:

- ▶ help plan and create safe and accessible spaces.
- ▶ help teachers and other school staff effectively include movement and activity in the school-day for the benefit of all students – including students who experience challenges moving around.
- ▶ participate in Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings and help develop individualized goals and follow-up strategies for students who need supports.

To gather information and determine if physiotherapy services would be useful, a PT might use a variety of assessment methods, including the following.

- ▶ Reviewing relevant records, school files, and medical reports.
- ▶ Observing the student participating in the school setting and typical activities.
- ▶ Assessing any barriers and supports in the school setting.
- ▶ Interviewing the student, teachers, learning assistance teachers, EAs, parents, and possibly service providers who work with the student.

What is a Functional Behaviour Assessment?

A functional behaviour assessment looks at a student's behaviour in their classroom and school community. The purpose is to identify things that cause students to have trouble controlling their emotions, such as doing things impulsively or having angry outbursts. Anyone of any age can have those types of difficulties at times, but a functional behaviour assessment can help identify why a student might be experiencing problems too often. It can also help inform a positive behaviour support plan, to give the child useful supports and strategies.

- ▶ Oftentimes, behaviour is a form of communication that students use to express their needs.
- ▶ Also, students can only meet behavioural expectations when:
 - they know what the expectations are.
 - they have the skills needed to meet the expectations.
- ▶ That's why it's important to focus on understanding what a student is feeling and experiencing, why they are acting in specific ways (what they are trying to communicate), and how they can develop skills that will help them express themselves in productive ways.

Remember: Responses to behaviour challenges should not be punishing. Students should not be secluded (put in a separate setting, left alone, and told to stay there) or restrained (held down so they cannot move). Educators are obligated to respect the dignity of all students, and to keep them safe from physical, emotional, or mental harm. If you have concerns that your child is being secluded or restrained at school, tell someone.

Assessment Results

Following a formal assessment, the specialist who conducted the tests will prepare a report. That report should be shared with parents.

Sometimes, an assessment might show that a student does *not* have an “exceptionality” – meaning

a diagnosed learning need, or a different way of thinking or learning that will impact on their education and participation at school. However, the report might identify extra supports or alternate teaching approaches that can help the student be more successful.

In other cases, an assessment might include a “diagnosis” that confirms the student has a specific type of “exceptionality.”

- ▶ A diagnosis is not meant to label a child in a negative way.
- ▶ The goal of a diagnosis is to help understand what a child needs and the best ways to teach the child and support them at home and in school.

An assessment is only meant to help determine a child’s special strengths and needs, and help pinpoint which interventions would likely be most effective for them.

- ▶ Whatever the results, an assessment can be a very important tool in designing the best education program for a child.
- ▶ Depending on the assessment results, a diagnosis might also help the school access additional resources to support a student.

- ▶ *Formal assessment reports are confidential.* The reports are only seen by people who need the information in their work with a student.
- ▶ Specialists and schools are responsible for keeping the report and all related information secure.
- ▶ Files and other paper records should be kept in locked cabinets.
- ▶ Electronic records must be protected through computer passwords and other relevant procedures.

Parents and guardians have a right to ask what steps will be taken to protect information about their child.

Your Rights Before and After an Assessment

- ▶ Parents and guardians are essential to a formal assessment process.
- ▶ Parents should be asked to provide written informed consent before any formal assessment takes place and before the results are shared.
 - Informed consent means more than a parent's signature on a piece of paper.
 - The assessment process should be explained in detail to parents or guardians.
 - Parents or guardians must be provided a copy of the assessment report.
 - Parents or guardians should decide how the assessment information is used within the school and shared with people who support their child. Allowing people who work with a student to see the assessment results can help everyone identify ways to help a child learn and get along with others more easily. But parents should always be asked to provide informed consent for how information about their child will be used.
 - Parents and guardians have the right to withdraw consent at any time, even after the testing has been done.
- ▶ There may be a wait time before an assessment can be completed for your child. Talk to the school about why there might be a wait and what services your child will receive in the meantime. While waiting, school staff should continue to support students.
- ▶ Parents can expect that specialists will take the time to fully explain their child's assessment results and related suggestions. School staff also should meet with parents to review the information and to discuss next steps. It is best for students when everyone shares the same understanding of the assessment results.
- ▶ Assessments are complicated. Parents should feel comfortable asking questions or asking for information to be repeated if it is not immediately clear. If educational "jargon" is used (meaning terms that aren't used in everyday conversation), it is entirely appropriate to ask school staff to explain any language that is unfamiliar.
- ▶ It is most important to remember that appropriate follow-up on an assessment is the primary goal. The assessment results should be used to help each student be happier and more successful in their education and their everyday lives.

Additional Things To Know About Assessing and Identifying Learning Needs

- ▶ Early identification can be helpful to prevent challenges from growing, but some assessments are not always appropriate for primary students. Talk to your child's school about this issue.
- ▶ All assessment and diagnoses should lead to better learning opportunities for your child. *However, having a diagnosis is not needed for a student to receive supports. Your child has a right to receive the supports and services they need whether or not they have a formal diagnosis of a disability or exceptionality.*
- ▶ Assessments may need to be updated at various times throughout a student's K-12 education.
- ▶ School personnel should always consult and inform parents about assessments they feel are needed. Formal assessments need your written consent.
- ▶ Sometimes only you will know that your child has had a bad night or a medication change that may impact assessment results. It is in your child's best interests that you are informed of any assessments to be performed so you can provide important input.
- ▶ As a parent, you may have concerns about how well your child knows the person who will be doing the assessment. Unfamiliar situations and people can be overwhelming. You may wonder how well your child will do if the assessor is a stranger. You may also have concerns about when and where an assessment will take place.

You have the right to ask questions, so you feel comfortable with the assessment process.

Questions to ask about assessments

- ☐ What do you hope to find out from this assessment?
- ☐ Why is this assessment being done?
- ☐ How is information about my child's strengths, talents, learning styles and needs being considered?
- ☐ How is the assessment done? Has my child been told what to expect? Are they comfortable with the process?
- ☐ How long will it take to receive the results?
- ☐ Will I get a copy of the assessment report? Will I be asked to give approval before the report is shared with anyone? *The answer to each of these questions should be yes!*
- ☐ Can I speak to the assessor so that I can understand the results?