

Evaluation: What Does It Mean for Your Child?

What is an evaluation?

Evaluation is a process that helps parents and schools determine whether a child has a disability. Under IDEA a “child with a disability” is one who qualifies for special education and related services. A child cannot receive special education without an evaluation.

Evaluation is completed in all areas of suspected disability. The process gathers information from a variety of sources about a child’s functioning and development. It looks at the child’s strengths and needs. It may examine cognitive, academic, behavioral, physical, and other developmental factors. Evaluation includes information provided by the parents. The information gathered through evaluation is used to:

- determine whether a child has a disability
- determine educational needs

Why have an evaluation?

An evaluation serves many purposes:

1. Identification. It will identify children who have delays or disabilities and need special education and related services.
2. Eligibility. It will determine whether a child is a “child with a disability” under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) definition. A “child with a disability” means a child who qualifies for special education and related services.
3. Planning an Individualized Education Program (IEP). It provides information that will help parents and school professionals develop an appropriate IEP for a child.
4. Instructional strategies. It will help determine effective strategies to help a child learn.
5. Measuring progress. It establishes a baseline (present level of performance) for measuring a child’s educational progress.

When the evaluation is completed, parents must be given a copy of the evaluation report and documentation that shows how the child’s eligibility was determined. Even if evaluation

results show that a child does not need special education and related services, the information may still be used to decide what accommodations may be needed in a regular education program.

What measures are used to evaluate a child?

No single test, by itself, may be used to determine whether a child has a disability, or to determine educational needs. Formal and informal tests, observations, parent information and other measures help schools and parents determine the need for special education and related services.

Tests measure 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’s performance on a particular day. Formal test data is useful in predicting how well a child might be expected to do in school. It also provides information about unique learning needs.

The school will conduct an individual evaluation that uses information from many sources including formal and informal data. Tests are important, but evaluation also includes other information such as:

- medical information
- comparing the child’s progress to typical child development
- observing how the child functions in school, at home, or in the community
- interviews with parents and school staff

Parents have a wealth of information about the growth and needs of their child. When combined with tests and other evaluation materials, this information is used to make decisions about an appropriate education.

What types of tests are available?

There are many types of tests that schools use to measure progress. These are a few important terms parents may need to know.



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Group tests

Group achievement tests may not be used to determine eligibility for special education. They provide information about how a child performs compared to others of the same age or grade, but do not identify an individual student's strengths and needs.

Individual tests

Tests given individually to a child are useful in determining unique learning strengths and needs.

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

These tests are developed by school staff to examine the progress a child has made in learning specific materials that the teacher has presented to the class. They can be useful tools for teachers and parents in determining whether learning is taking place. However, they must never be used alone to determine if a child is eligible for special education.

Standardized tests

Standardized tests are developed by experts for use with large groups of students. The tests are given according to specific standards. These tests assess what a child has already learned (achievement), or predict what a child may be able to do in the future (ability).

Norm-referenced tests

Norm-referenced tests are standardized tests that compare a child's performance to that of peers. They show where a child stands compared to other children of the same age or grade.

Criterion-referenced tests

These tests measure what a 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. Rather, they look at a child's performance measured against standard criteria. They may compare present performance with past performance as a way of measuring progress.

What criteria are used in selecting tests?

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

- Tests must be reliable. A test is reliable if it offers similar results when taken at different times or given by different evaluators. Parents may ask for the reliability of tests given their child if this information isn't discussed along with the test results.
- Tests must be valid. A test is valid if it measures what it was designed to measure.

- Tests must accurately reflect the child's aptitude or achievement. Standardized tests must have been validated for the specific testing purpose. They must also be given by trained and knowledgeable people.
- Tests and other evaluation materials must not discriminate against a child on a racial or cultural basis. They must be administered in a child's native language or other mode of communication unless it is clearly not feasible to do so.

Factors such as a 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 an 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, assessing whether the student is able to ride the city bus, dress without help, or handle money will 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 (FBA) can provide additional information to help the team plan more effective interventions. A typical FBA includes the following:

- A clear description of the problem behavior
- Observations of the child at different times and in different settings. 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
- Behavioral interventions to address the behavior and teach behavior skills

Once a functional behavior assessment has been completed, the results may be used to write a behavior intervention plan or to develop behavior goals for the IEP.

How are evaluation results used?

After a child's evaluation is complete, parents will meet with a group of qualified professionals to discuss the results. This group will determine whether a child has a disability under IDEA. The school district must provide parents with a copy of the evaluation report. It must also give parents written information on how the group determined that the child was or was not eligible for services.

If the child is found eligible for special education and related services, the next step is to develop an IEP to meet that 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 parents to understand the results of the evaluation before beginning to develop an IEP. They may ask to have the evaluation results explained to them by a qualified professional.

It is important to review the evaluation summary report before developing the IEP. Many parents choose to review the results at home or other comfortable environment before meeting to develop an IEP.

When are students reevaluated?

Students receiving special education services must be reevaluated when:

- conditions warrant a reevaluation, or
- if the child's parents or teacher requests a reevaluation, but not more often than once per year

Evaluation must be conducted at least every three years unless parents and school staff agree that it is not needed.

The results are used to monitor a child's progress in meeting the goals in his or her IEP and to determine whether the child continues to need special education and related services.

A reevaluation will include a review of existing data, information from parents, classroom assessments, and observations. The IEP team will decide if additional data are needed to determine if the child continues to need special education and related services. If the IEP team decides that no additional data are needed, parents will be informed in writing. 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?
2. Will someone observe my child in the classroom and talk to my child's teachers?
3. Has the evaluator had experience testing children who are similar to my child?
4. Will my child's disability make it hard to obtain valid test scores in any area?
5. Does my child need a translator or interpreter? (Testing must be done in a child's native language or sign language if needed.)

6. Is the person who will actually conduct the test familiar with my child's culture?
7. Will test scores be based on my child's grade or on 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 share with the team?
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 parents disagree with the results of an evaluation, they have the right to obtain an independent educational evaluation (IEE). An IEE is conducted by qualified people who are not employed by the school. The school district must provide parents with a list names of possible examiners. The district must either provide the IEE at no cost to the parents or initiate a due process hearing to show that its evaluation was appropriate.

If the result of the hearing is that the district's evaluation is appropriate, parents still have the right to obtain an IEE, but not at school district expense.

If parents obtain an independent educational evaluation on their own and it meets the school's criteria, those results must be considered by the IEP team. The results of an IEE must be considered by the IEP team in planning.