

## **Psychological Assessments for Learning Disabilities**

Dr. Ian Brown

The following are answers to frequently asked questions about the role of psychological services personnel in assessing, diagnosing, and providing services to children with learning disabilities.

### **1. Who can diagnose a learning disability?**

A Psychologist or Psychological Associate who is registered with the College of Psychologists of Ontario and who does not have a restriction on his or her certificate of registration can diagnose Learning Disabilities (and a host of other psychological conditions). Because “Communicating a Diagnosis” is a Controlled Act under provincial legislation (because of the potential harm that can result from inaccurate diagnoses), there are stringent requirements that must be met before the right to diagnose is granted. Further, not all psychologists and psychological associates are certified to work with children, or to conduct assessments of learning disabilities, and therefore may not be suitably qualified to arrive at a correct diagnosis. Parents (and other consumers) need to ask specific questions about a practitioner’s qualifications and areas of competence.

### **2. What is a Psychological Associate?**

While a Psychologist has graduate university training at the doctoral level (typically a Ph.D. in psychology), a Psychological Associate has training typically at the Master’s level. Both titles can be used only if the person using the title is registered with the College of Psychologists of Ontario. A Psychometrist or Psychoeducational Consultant typically has a Master’s degree in Psychology, but is not registered with the College, and is usually supervised by a Psychologist or Psychological Associate.

### **3. What is involved in a psychological assessment for a possible learning disability?**

A psychological assessment involves gathering information from a number of sources, and using that information to draw conclusions. The sources of information may include parents, teachers, observations, interviews, review of records and schoolwork, formal psychometric measures, and informal testing and evaluation. It is essential to rule out other explanations for the child’s presenting difficulties, and to determine the strengths and weaknesses in the child’s functioning. The information

gathered may be very helpful in facilitating decision making about academic and vocational choices, or further interventions which might be appropriate, for example. Formal psychometric assessment usually looks at reasoning and thinking ability, visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic processing, memory, attention, academic skills, social and emotional functioning, and a number of other areas in order to develop a comprehensive picture of a child's current functioning. An assessment can take several hours, often spread over a few days.

#### **4. Who can conduct psychological assessments?**

Psychological assessments can be done only by those people who are properly trained and qualified in psychological assessment. This includes most (but not all) psychologists and psychological associates, and psychometrists who typically work under the supervision of a psychologist or psychological associate. No assessments are undertaken without the written informed consent of the parent or legal guardian.

#### **5. How do I find a psychologist who can assess my child?**

Most school boards employ psychological services staff who provide assessment, counselling, and consultation services to schools. These people are accessed through the school principal. Additionally, there are a number of psychologists in private practice who usually accept direct referrals from parents. The Ontario Psychological Association also provides a referral service. Sometimes the best way to select someone with whom you and your child are comfortable and compatible is by word-of-mouth references, or by meeting the practitioner in advance of committing to the involvement.

#### **6. What happens after the assessment?**

When all the information which has been gathered as part of the assessment is analyzed, a formal written report is prepared. This is discussed with the parents, the child if appropriate, and with school staff if the referral was generated through the school. The findings are explained, suggestions offered, and recommendations made. If a diagnosis has been made, it will be presented at this time. The parent is given a copy of the report after its contents have been thoroughly explained, in order to minimize misunderstanding of the results. When the referral has been generated through the school, the principal is also given a copy of the report. The recommendations might include specific

suggestions for teachers regarding teaching approaches which complement the child's learning style. A recommendation for further intervention such as counselling or therapy might also be made.

**7. What other services do psychological services personnel provide?**

Many psychologists and psychological associates are also qualified to provide counselling and / or therapy to children, adolescents, and adults. In addition, they consult to schools regarding issues of mental health, effective programming, and learning / teaching.

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