

Multi-Disciplinary Assessments: A Parent's Guide

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A multi-disciplinary assessment is typically performed when either the school or the parent suspects that a child may benefit from special education services. Before the services can be provided, however, a child must be identified with a disability to be eligible under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This identification occurs through a multi-disciplinary assessment.

The Multi-Disciplinary Assessment –

It is important to know the difference between an assessment and a test. A test is the administration of educational and psychological measures of behavior. Tests are usually specifically designed and standardized and are often one component used in the assessment process. An assessment is best defined as a problem-solving process. It includes gathering information and drawing a conclusion.

The information that is gathered may include:

- Observations of student interaction with parents, teachers, and peers.
- Interviews with student and significant others in his life.
- Examination of school records and past evaluations.
- Evaluations of developmental and medical histories.
- Feedback from parents, teachers, and student.
- Student's type and rate of learning.
- Identification of which tasks student has mastered, needs to master, and should be taught.
- Teacher and peer attitude towards students with disabilities.

Requesting an Assessment –

There are three ways in which your child may receive an assessment:

1. You can request an evaluation if you feel that something is not "right." To do this, call or write to the director of special education or the school's principal. If the school refuses to evaluate your child, they are required to send you a written notice explaining their refusal and an explanation of your rights under IDEA. Keep this letter for your records.
 - If you still believe that an assessment is necessary, look into having an Independent Educational Evaluation by a qualified professional.
 - The school district is responsible for the expense of this evaluation and is also required to help you find a qualified professional.
2. Your child's school may contact you and ask permission to evaluate. This is typically based on observations or results from standardized tests given to all children. Before the school can begin the evaluation, you must give written permission.
3. Your child's teacher or doctor may recommend an evaluation. Your permission is needed before there can be any further action.

Because an assessment is designed with all areas of the child's life in mind, a multi-disciplinary team will look at many aspects of your child's life. Team members come from varying backgrounds and disciplines. Depending on the concerns, the assessment team may include:

- School psychologist
- Speech and language pathologist
- Physical or occupational therapist

- Medical specialist
- Educational diagnostician
- Classroom teacher
- Other significant individuals in your child's academic environment

Through the assessment process, the team will:

- Screen and identify if there are delays or learning disabilities.
- Determine and diagnose the nature of the problem or disability and determine eligibility for special education services.
- Gather information to help the development of an IEP.
- Develop appropriate instruction for special needs.
- Evaluate any progress your child has made.

Depending on information gathered, the team may determine that your child is eligible for special education services, but the multi-disciplinary assessment is only the first step in a very thorough and detailed process. You will next be invited to attend your child's Individualized Education Program meeting in which you will help develop strategies to support your child's education.

To prepare for the meeting:

- Identify your concerns and review past observations.
- Review any information you have received about the assessment for questions
- Request school files and review.

Though it may seem long and tedious at times, being a part of this process ensures that your child receives the best education for his special needs.

IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act –

The special education services for children with disabilities are required under the IDEA, a federal law that defines the rights of families and children with disabilities. These are special rights not available to children without disabilities. A child is defined to be an individual between the ages of 3 to 22. Families and children have the following rights:

- The school is required to test and assess the child to determine special education eligibility and needs.
- Families are permitted to review their child's school records.
- Families are invited to attend an "Individualized Education Program" (IEP) meeting to help develop a written IEP plan with teachers, school representatives, and other professionals.
- Families can resolve disputes with school through an impartial administrative and legal process.

To standardize the facilitation of services, the IDEA uses 13 categories of disabilities. In her article "Assessing Children for the Presence of Disability" Dr. Betsy B. Waterman defines the 13 categories:

1. Autism: a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3.
2. Deafness: a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information, with or without amplification.
3. Deaf-blindness: simultaneous hearing and visual impairments;

4. Hearing impairment: an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating.
5. Mental retardation: significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior.
6. Multiple disabilities: the manifestation of two or more disabilities (such as mental retardation-blindness), the combination of which requires special accommodation for maximal learning.
7. Orthopedic impairment: physical disabilities, including congenital impairments, impairments caused by disease, and impairments from other causes.
8. Other health impairment: having limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems.
9. Serious emotional disturbance: a disability where a child of typical intelligence has difficulty, over time and to a marked degree, building satisfactory interpersonal relationships; responds inappropriately, behaviorally or emotionally, under normal circumstances; demonstrates a pervasive mood of unhappiness; or has a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears.
10. Specific learning disability: a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.
11. Speech or language impairment: a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment.
12. Traumatic brain injury: an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both.
13. Visual impairment: a visual difficulty (including blindness) that, even with correction, adversely affects a child educational performance.

Many students who don't fit into these categories still benefit from special education services. If your child does not fit into these specifically, he may still be eligible for a special education program at school, especially if he has ADHD. If you think your child needs extra help or different services, be persistent and work with the school.

Conclusion –

Before your child can receive special education services, a multi-disciplinary assessment is required to determine his specific needs. Be patient. It may seem that there are too many rules and steps involved, but it is through this process that you and the school can determine the best way to teach and serve your child.