

School-based and Clinic-based Assessments: Understanding the Differences

by Katie Newton, PhD., L.P.

Families looking for help for their child at school often feel bombarded by a wealth of information, jargon, and acronyms. It can feel overwhelming and confusing, like learning a foreign language. Often times, it is unclear which path to take and some paths seem redundant. Assessment is one way in which professionals try and clarify a child's particular strengths, deficits, and intervention needs, but the format of this assessment may vary. Psychoeducational assessment is conducted through the child's school district by a school psychologist and is completed as part of consideration of eligibility for special education services. School districts are guided in this process by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and determine eligibility for services on the basis of whether a student meets criteria in one or more of the 13 federal categories of disability:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Deafness
- Blindness
- Emotional/Behavioral Disturbance
- Hearing Impairment
- Intellectual Disabilities
- Multiple Disabilities
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Other Health Impairment (e.g., Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Specific Learning Disability
- Visual Impairment

If a child is eligible for special education services under one of these disability categories, the family and school team will develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to ensure that his/her learning needs are met.

Psychological or Neuropsychological assessment is conducted through a clinic by a licensed psychologist or neuropsychologist and is completed in order to determine whether the child meets criteria for a neurocognitive or mental health disorder. Criteria for these disorders are determined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - 5 (DSM-5), as developed by the American Psychiatric Association. Common diagnoses may include: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety and depressive disorders, and Specific Learning Disorders (SLD).

While there is some overlap in the educational and clinical criteria, they are not identical. This can pose some confusion and challenge for families navigating these two worlds, as a clinical diagnosis does not necessarily translate into meeting the eligibility criteria for special education services at school, and vice versa. In other words, a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder by a clinical psychologist does not guarantee that student will also meet the eligibility criteria for ASD at school.

There are options available for families seeking help in understanding their options and rights at school. Families looking for additional support are encouraged to contact PACER.org, a parent advocacy group that guides families as to the educational laws and family rights in the school system. Psychologists at PCS can also be excellent resources in these areas.