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How to Get the Most out of Psychological Testing for your Child

If you are a parent considering testing for your child, you face many clinician options, insurance questions, and ultimately, feelings of vulnerability. It is quite daunting to hand your child off to a professional who will ultimately provide information that could yield feelings of relief, despair, validation, confusion, or almost anything in between. I've felt this vulnerability as a parent, but I am also writing as a therapist who has had the honor of working with a gifted psychologist for many years.

A psychological evaluation utilizes multiple psychometric tests created with complex statistics and years of careful development to provide valid and reliable assessment tools. When we apply this practice to the evaluation of children, the results have a significant impact on treatment, academic placement, and even how the rest of the world might view him or her. When used for diagnosis, the implications of the testing process are critical, and will guide other professional's decisions.

In simplest terms, as parents we should expect psychological evaluations to be accurate, respected, useful, and as low-stress as possible. Following are very important factors to consider as you determine where, and by whom, your child is evaluated:

1) Choose a practice that provides assistance with insurance and a cost estimate in advance.

Insurance plans' coverage of psychological testing has historically been a bit tricky. While mental health benefits in general follow some standard rules, policies for covering psychological testing vary widely, and many plans require a rather extensive preauthorization process requiring the Psychologist to submit pre-evaluation information. If you choose an in-network provider, not only will you pay less out of pocket for services, but you know that the provider you choose has passed a thorough credentialing process that continues every two years.

Practices that advertise that they provide you with a receipt so that you can file for reimbursement are not considered in-network providers. After the service is rendered, you might find that preauthorization was required but not submitted, or that they do not cover psychological testing at all. Given the cost of testing, the best suggestion is to choose a practice that verifies your benefits in advance, and provides you with an educated estimate about what your out of pocket cost will be.

2) Avoid "quick service" psychological testing.

Although some Psychologists advertise "same-day results" or quick evaluations, realize that there are significant advantages to a comprehensive testing protocol during which there are several appointments. This allows the Psychologist to observe your child's behavior, emotional state, attitude, and interactional style across several different days, thus ensuring that your child's typical self is

represented in the evaluation data. For younger children, fatigue effects could interfere with accurate diagnosis.

Furthermore, having testing appointments over several days or weeks, allows the testing professional to make helpful changes to the testing protocol should the initial data or observations require it. Time allows for appropriate clinical flexibility. In short, diagnosis is best done with patience. Often, quickly completed evaluations result in rather generic recommendations that fit the diagnosis rather than the individual being evaluated. A comprehensive evaluation generally yields more personalized recommendations that take into consideration a person's family dynamics, medical history, social functioning, etc...

3) Look for psychologists that administer testing materials themselves, rather than having assistants administer tests.

Our Psychologist, Dr. Jennifer Conaty, prefers to administer all testing materials herself, so that she can directly assess the child's behavior and response to the process. Her reactions and observations provide additional clinical data that ultimately provides a more individualized interpretation of the testing data and high value individualized treatment recommendations.

4) Ask if the testing protocol recommended will meet the requirements your local school system has established for development of an IEP (individualized educational plan).

Psychological testing can be expensive, but also requires significant effort and time. The results are generally used to make important therapeutic treatment or medication decisions. Academic placement and educational accommodations also heavily depend on psychological testing. Why invest so much in this process if the final results are not respected by your local school system? Conscientious practices are knowledgeable about the protocols required by their local school system, and strive to provide testing services that are not only accurate, but useful!

5) Ask your Psychologist if the evaluation protocol will be sensitive to a broad range of disorders.

Most of the time, referrals are made for psychological testing because the parents or physician is concerned that their child might have a specific disorder. In these cases, the suspected diagnosis will drive the testing protocol. However, the scope of the evaluation materials should not all be so narrow as to miss other possible causes for observed symptoms. A thorough psychological evaluation should include some broad measures of general concerns as well as measures designed to look for the presence of specific diagnoses. For instance, not every child who appears to be ADHD is.... Children with learning disabilities, anxiety, or trauma often appear inattentive. Every child is different, and the evaluation process is most helpful when it can look beyond a single explanation of behavior.

6) Ask your pediatrician or therapist for recommendations of highly reputable psychologists in your area.

Pediatricians and therapists often collaborate with testing Psychologists and read many such evaluations. Therefore, they are a great source of information about local testing options. These professionals know very well which Psychologists produce the most helpful, comprehensive, and understandable evaluations.

7) Check the licenses of the Psychologists you are considering.

Most states' Psychologist Licensure Boards provide formal complaint and discipline information for the consumer, free of charge, on their websites. While it is always good to check this, make sure to read the details of any charges listed, as listed complaints may be founded or unfounded. Since licensure board reports are objective, this information can sometimes be more helpful than online health professional rating sites that can contain reactive or even fake reviews.

8) A careful child evaluation should include the gathering of extensive developmental, behavioral, and contextual information.

No person exists in a vacuum. Human behavior, cognition, and emotion should not be evaluated without consideration of environmental and familial influences (nature AND nurture). Our practice Psychologist always has parents complete extensive questionnaires regarding developmental history, educational history, medical history, sources of stress, parenting, family resources, etc, prior to beginning the testing process. All of this information, including her own observations of her patients enter into the evaluation and any treatment recommendations.

9) Pay attention to how comfortable you and your child feel with the Psychologist.

While personality fit is less critical for testing than it is for ongoing counseling, ideally the patient or student should feel relatively at ease and comfortable with the professional providing their assessment. Accurate results depend somewhat on a person's emotional state, so if your child is more anxious than normal around the Psychologist because of the professional's personality or communication style, this is something to consider. Of course most people will be a bit more nervous when completing an evaluation, but we want to minimize this as much as possible. Comfortable fit between the Psychologist and their client is rather unpredictable, so paying attention to your gut instincts and your child's comfort level is important in getting accurate results and in trusting the whole process of evaluation.

10) The value of a diagnostic evaluation is in the quality of the recommendations for treatment.

While having a diagnosis can be useful, merely affixing a label to a set of behaviors and symptoms is only the first step. Completing a comprehensive evaluation allows a psychologist to provide detailed recommendations, whether for therapy, medication, school services, or home behavior management. Often, these recommendations form the basis of a treatment plan for ongoing services or an intervention plan at school. You should complete the evaluation process with a clear understanding of what the next steps will be, and how to improve the symptoms that caused you to seek evaluation in the first place. At this time, you should also be provided with referrals to other professionals (i.e., psychiatrist, therapist, educational advocate) as needed.