

Is it time for a psycho-educational assessment?

By Jenny Demark

As parents, we all want our children to succeed at school and to enjoy their learning and social opportunities. School is meant to be fun, challenging and rewarding. Unfortunately, some students have significant learning difficulties. Others don't seem able to interact appropriately with their peers. And some cannot regulate their behaviour in the classroom. How can you know if your child's challenges are typical for their age? Is it just a phase? Or is there something more going on? A psycho-educational assessment can help to answer these questions.

Your child's teachers will often be the first ones to raise red flags. Perhaps your son is more disruptive than would be expected for his age or the situation. Maybe your daughter is not learning to read as quickly as her peers. Or maybe your twins have yet to make friends. Teachers know a lot about children's social, emotional and behavioural development, and their concerns should be taken seriously.

That said, as a parent, you know your children better than anyone else. If you notice that your child seems very unhappy to go to school, is making slow progress in key academics (reading, writing or math), is being sent to the office frequently for misbehaviour or is having ongoing challenges with friendships, you may want support from a psychologist.

What Are the Benefits of a Psycho-Educational Assessment?

A psycho-educational assessment is

a comprehensive review of your child's cognition, memory, learning, behaviour and social-emotional skills. The goal is to understand your child's profile of strengths and weaknesses and to determine ways to provide support if needed. Psychologists use standardized assessment tools to evaluate verbal and nonverbal reasoning, visual-spatial skills, language, working memory, processing speed, academic achievement, behaviour and day-to-day functioning. This information is then used to determine how to help your child achieve their full academic potential.

What Are the Risks?

Luckily, a psycho-educational assessment comes with very few risks. Most children actually enjoy the opportunity to work one-to-one with an adult on interesting puzzles and activities. The biggest risk is that you could receive results that you did not expect. But information is power, and the assessment results will allow you to access increased supports if your child needs them.



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Will My Child Receive a Diagnosis?

Not necessarily. Part of a psychologist's role is to determine whether a child or adolescent meets the criteria for a developmental, learning, behavioural, social or emotional disorder. A thorough psycho-educational assessment will be able to determine if there is a diagnosis that applies to your child. Possible diagnoses include Specific Learning Disorder, Language Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder. If your child meets the criteria for one or more diagnosis, you will receive information about what that means, what can be expected in the future and what interventions can help. However, many children who have a psycho-educational assessment do not end up with a diagnosis. If this is the case, you will still receive a thorough description of your child's learning strengths

and needs as well as recommendations for areas to work on.

How Do I Find a Psychologist?

The first step is to ask about the school board's ability to provide an assessment. If the waiting time is longer than you would like, you may opt to work with a psychologist in private practice. Ottawa has many highly skilled psychologists who specialize in assessment but ask around before settling on a provider. Look for people who have a reputation of working collaboratively with parents, provide comprehensive reports and are experts in working with children and youth. Though costs and waiting times vary widely, be prepared to wait up to six months and to pay at least \$2,000. Psychological services are not covered by OHIP, but they may be covered by your employer's insurance if you have a physician's referral.

Who Has Access to the Results?

As with all health care, psychological services are confidential. Nobody other than you will have access to the information collected during a psycho-educational assessment. You may choose to share the information with your child's school or pediatrician, but that is entirely your choice.

In summary, a psycho-educational assessment can be the critical first step to making school more fun and rewarding for your child. Most parents find that it is well worth the time and effort.

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