

# Maryland School Mental Health Alliance\*

## *Psychological Assessment Information for School Providers*

### **What is Psychological Assessment?**

Psychological assessment includes a clinical interview, rating scales, formal psychological testing and interpretation of that testing by a qualified psychologist.

- Psychological testing uses standardized techniques to measure a student's functioning in a variety of domains, including cognitive, educational, behavioral and psychosocial
- Tests should never be used nor interpreted in isolation
  - Each published test has qualifications for use
- Methods used in psychological assessment
  - Caregiver and student interview
  - Rating scales (norm-referenced)
    - Parent, teacher, self-report
  - Behavioral observations during testing
  - Standardized tests (norm-referenced)
  - Subjective measures (e.g., projective techniques)

### **What does it mean for a test to be “standardized”?**

- Exact procedures for administration
- Instructions and questions must be repeated in exactly the same way every time
- Same materials are used every time
- Rules for scoring are specifically defined, and are not open to interpretation

### **Why is it important for tests to be norm-referenced?**

- A norm-referenced test was given to a large number of people (the “standardization sample”) that is representative of the population of interest
- From this, one can derive standard scores; i.e., how an individual compares to the standardization sample
- Standard scores allow to us interpret an individual's scores

### **Types of standard scores:**

- Test scores can be expressed as:
  - Age equivalents (performance is typical of what age group in the standardization sample)
  - Grade equivalents (performance is typical of what grade level in the standardization sample)
  - Percentiles (individual's relative position in the standardization sample)
  - Deviation scores (express individual's distance from the mean in terms of the standard deviation of the distribution)

### **Why are scores sometimes given in ranges?**

- A standard score reflects the individual's “true score” + or – error
- A confidence interval is computed statistically and tells us what degree of confidence you should have in a score

- Example: an IQ score of 100 might have a CI of 95-105, we can say with 90% certainty that the “true score” falls somewhere within that range

### **Who conducts psychological assessments?**

- Licensed psychologists and neuropsychologists
- School psychologists

### **What questions can psychological assessment answer?**

- Diagnostic clarification
- Level of developmental or cognitive functioning
- Patterns of strengths and weaknesses
- Academic placement or program eligibility determinations
- Tracking progress or deterioration over time

### **When you make a referral:**

- Ask a specific, answerable question
  - Examples of good questions:
    - Does this student need special education?
    - Is this student gifted?
    - Does this student have attention problems?
    - Is this student depressed?
  - Examples of bad questions:
    - Will this student be violent in the future? (Psychologists are not good fortune tellers)
    - Why does this student \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)? (Psychologists are not good mind readers)
- Do not specify which tests to be given
- Send as much information as you can, testing cannot be interpreted in isolation
  - Send in school reports, medical, family, and developmental history and observations you have conducted

### **Common domains assessed:**

- Early development
- Cognitive/intellectual
- Adaptive living skills
- Academic achievement
- Language and communication
- Attention, memory and learning
- Social/emotional and personality functioning
- Specialized assessments

*\*Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*