

About Psychological Assessments - A guide for Caregivers

A psychological assessment is a close look into how a person with a developmental disability thinks and copes with daily life. It is done by a psychologist, psychological associate, or someone who works for and is supervised by a psychologist.

It usually involves meeting with the person with the disability, asking them questions and asking them to do a number of short tasks (some that require talking and some that don't like puzzles, or matching) and recording their responses. It also usually includes interviewing someone who knows the person really well, preferably a family member but sometimes also a staff person like; group home staff, job coach, or teacher.

A typical assessment of developmental disability can take between 2 and 4 hours in total, and for some people, it might require several shorter meetings as opposed to one long meeting. After an assessment, the person can expect to get feedback, which includes an explanation of the results of the assessment and a written report.

This is the Ontario definition of developmental disability:

According to [Legislation](#) (Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act, 2008), a person has a developmental disability if the person has the prescribed **significant limitations in cognitive functioning and adaptive functioning** and those limitations:

- Originated before the person reached 18 years of age;
- Are likely to be life-long in nature; and
- Affect areas of major life activity, such as personal care, language skills, learning abilities, the capacity to live independently as an adult or any other prescribed activity.

This definition has 3 parts and each is considered when a psychologist does his or her assessment:

#1) **Cognitive functioning**, also sometimes called IQ, is measured using an IQ test.

This involves the person completing a variety of different tasks, one-to-one with the psychologist. Some tasks might be timed, and others can take as long as the person needs. The tasks usually start out easy and keep going until they get too difficult.

A person's performance on a task is compared to how most people of the same age do on that task. If the person has a much harder time than most people of similar age, we would call this "significant difficulty with cognitive functioning." A person can have significant difficulty across only some of the IQ test tasks, or across all of the tasks. In some situations, the person being assessed might have real difficulties doing any testing. The psychologist in this situation may need to use his or her judgment to figure out if there are cognitive limitations based on observation and reports from others.

Continued —>

#2) Adaptive functioning, or a person's day-to-day functioning (e.g., communication, socialization, daily living, etc.) is typically assessed through an interview or questionnaires with the parent or caregiver. It refers to the skills that a person needs to be independent in many aspects of his or her life and the interview covers a number of different tasks that the person can or cannot do independently.

This interview can take anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. Like the IQ test, how a person does is compared to what most people can do of the same age. If the person has a much harder time than most people, then that means that the person has "significant difficulty with adaptive functioning."

#3) Timing: It is best that a psychological assessment be completed, ideally **before age 18**. This is because developmental disabilities have to be present **before** adulthood. There are other kinds of disabilities or problems that do not start until adulthood, like some types of mental illness, or a brain injury that happens in adulthood. It is the psychologist's job to try to figure out when the problems started. Problems that only start in adulthood are not called *developmental* disabilities, even if problems with cognitive functioning and adaptive functioning are there.

What if an assessment is not done before the age of 18?

If an assessment is being completed in adulthood for the first time, the psychologist will try to get as many details as possible about what your family member was like before age 18. School records or any reports from therapists your family member may have seen as a child can be helpful in this regard. Usually, if people have developmental disabilities, there will be hints about this in report cards and school documentation or in clinic notes from health care providers they saw when they were younger.

How do I get a psychological assessment for my family member?

1) Private assessments: If you are willing to pay, you can choose to hire a psychologist privately to conduct a comprehensive assessment for your family member. The average cost for a psychological assessment is between \$1500 and \$3000, but can be higher depending on how long the assessment takes and how detailed it is. Often, private insurance can cover all or part of this assessment, but private assessments are **not** covered by OHIP. You can ask the psychologist in advance about what s/he plans to do in the assessment and how long it is expected to take.

2) Referral to a hospital based psychologist or a psychologist that is part of a developmental disabilities agency: You may be referred (by your family doctor) to an agency in your region, which will conduct the assessment. Given that this is a free service, you can expect that the majority of agencies and hospitals will have long wait lists.

3) Through your local school board: In Ontario, children who are having difficulties in the classroom may be assessed by a school psychologist depending on how many difficulties they have. Typically, the school board will wait until your child is in grade 3 to conduct the assessment. Many adults and older youth have had these reports done in the past and they are kept on file, even after they graduate. The school board is required to keep the file for 10 years after graduation and you can request a copy of this report.

What happens with the results?

Results from these assessments should be shared with you and your family member. They should also be **forwarded to your family member's doctor** and will provide recommendations on how to help your family member function in day-to-day life. Be sure to ask that any reports completed privately or through school get shared with their doctor. As well, if the individual is in need of medication or other types of interventions (e.g., Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, Psychiatry), the assessment might make those recommendations. Lastly, the results can be used to inform an Individualized Education Plan for individuals in school, or an Individual Plan for adults.

How can I prepare for the assessment?

It is always great to bring information from other assessments that were done in the past or reports from different clinics or hospitals that had occurred in the past. This can include assessments from occupational therapists, psychiatrists, speech/language pathologists, or from teams of professionals that work together. If you don't know if the information would be helpful, bring it along and ask the psychologist.

- Usually, you can ask for copies of any reports that have been written by different specialists about your family member.
- If your family member was in school and in special education, there should be a file which includes an assessment at the school board. These reports are typically kept on file for 10 years after graduation. It is also helpful to bring copies of report cards from many different years or any letters from school staff.
- If you know that your family member will need lots of breaks, or does better at the start or end of day, request this when booking your appointment.
- Bring snacks and let the psychologist know how to recognize that your family member needs breaks.
- Be prepared that for part of the time the psychologist may ask that you not be in the room. This is so that s/he can see how your family member does without any help or support.

It is a great idea to keep a binder of all assessments and consultations about your family member. You can give copies to the psychologist or other clinicians but keep the originals for yourself. This can save time in the future instead of asking clinicians to search for these documents each time or possibly miss out on important information from the past.