



Psychological Re-evaluations: Why are they important?

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When a young child is first diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a variety of therapies are oftentimes recommended. Commonly these include applied behavior analysis (ABA), speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and/or a therapeutic school programs. A child's responsiveness to such therapies, however, can be quite difficult to predict. Some children make rapid gains once beginning therapy. For other children, improvements may progress more slowly. Inevitably, over the course of treatment, questions begin to emerge. Parents may begin asking themselves questions like *Are the therapies working? Does my child still need all his therapies? Is there a different therapy we should be doing? What kind of school setting does he need? Does he still have an autism spectrum disorder?* Once such questions emerge, it may be time for a psychological re-evaluation.

What is a psychological re-evaluation?

A psychological re-evaluation is an individually-tailored, comprehensive assessment that yields critical information needed to update a treatment plan. During the evaluation process, a psychologist examines a child's developmental and therapeutic history, his responsiveness to prior treatments and his current functioning. Information is gathered from a variety of sources including parent/caregiver interviews, standardized testing with a child, teacher and therapist report, school/clinical observations and review of therapeutic records. The process can be somewhat lengthy, taking place over the course of several weeks. However, because every child is unique, it is important that psychologists are thorough in their evaluations. In the end, a psychologist is able to integrate all sources of information and provide a detailed explanation of a child's learning strengths and weaknesses as well as specific therapeutic recommendations.

What are the benefits of a re-evaluation?

A re-evaluation can be one of the most important things a caregiver can do to guide a child's therapeutic programming. This is particularly true because selecting treatments for a child with an ASD is a dynamic process that requires adjustments over time. When very young children are





evaluated, a psychologist is able to assess only limited aspects of development (e.g., language, motor functioning, and socialization). Initial therapeutic recommendations reflect these limitations. However, as a child with an ASD matures, the degree to which ASD symptoms impact a child become clearer. With older children, psychologists are able to conduct more fine-grained assessments and identify specific therapeutic needs. For example, some children with ASD experience emotional difficulties (e.g., depression, anxieties), particularly as they become more aware of their social difficulties. Other children may exhibit isolated difficulties in academic domains (e.g., handwriting, reading comprehension). The good news is that once these difficulties are identified, then targeted treatments can begin.

Ultimately, it is important to remember that the recommended therapies for a young child are likely to be significantly different than what would be recommended for a school-aged child, or adolescent with ASD. A re-evaluation allows a clinician to examine a child's strengths and weaknesses across a range of areas to identify which therapies, accommodations and supports will make a child most successful, happy and independent.

When is the best time to get a re-evaluation?

In general, a good rule of thumb is that children with ASD should be re-evaluated every 2-4 years. Beyond this general guideline, re-evaluations are recommended prior to times of significant transition (e.g., moving from pre-K to elementary, or from elementary to middle school). On those occasions, the re-evaluation will provide information to assist a successful transition. Re-evaluations are also recommended when there is a significant change in functioning (either dramatic gains in functioning or conversely deteriorations in functioning). In both cases, there is a likely a need for an updated treatment plan.

Who should do the psychological evaluation?

For children with ASD, finding the right psychologist can be tricky. It is particularly important to seek out a psychologist who specializes in ASD. Finding someone knowledgeable in ASD is the best way to ensure the conclusions and recommendations you receive at the end of the evaluation fit your child well. It is additionally important to find a psychologist who will be able to get the best out of your child. You want to find someone who will be able to establish a supportive and comfortable testing environment. Many psychologists will offer a consultation, prior to beginning the assessment as a way to help parents ensure they are selecting a psychologist who meets their needs.

