

What is Adaptive Behavior?

The assessment of adaptive behavior is a very important part of the overall assessment process. Adaptive behavior refers to the effectiveness or degree with which individuals meet the standards of personal independence and social responsibility expected for age and cultural groups. When doing an evaluation of adaptive behavior there are a number of areas in which the examiner should focus.

These areas include:

- Communication
- Community use
- Self-direction
- Health and safety
- Functional academics
- Self-care
- Home living
- Social skills
- Leisure
- Work

Understanding adaptive behavior is very important when working with or assessing the intellectually disabled population. Adaptive behavior is a required area of assessment when a classification of intellectual disability is being considered for a student. Under IDEA, it specifies "deficits in adaptive behavior" as one of the two characteristics necessary for a student to be classified as intellectual and developmentally disabled (new term for IDEA classification of mentally retarded) the other being significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning.

There are many different ways in which an evaluator can measure adaptive behavior. Because it is often used to assess those with lower levels of intellectual functioning, the student being evaluated may not have to take part directly in the evaluation. The way many of these diagnostic assessment instruments work is that the examiner records information collected from a third person who is familiar with the student (e.g. parent, teacher, direct service provider). Perhaps the greatest problem with doing an assessment on adaptive behavior is the fact that many of the scales and tests do not have high validity and reliability. Also, there are serious concerns about the cultural bias of the tests. Consequently, great care must be taken when selecting the most appropriate measure for an individual student. With respect to minority students, it should also be noted that is imperative to develop an understanding of what types of behavior are considered adaptive (and thus appropriate) in the minority culture before making diagnostic judgments about the particular functioning of a student.