



NASSET ADHD SERIES

Part # 4 - Evaluation Procedures Used in the Assessment of Students with ADHD

Introduction

A diagnosis of ADHD is multifaceted and includes behavioral, medical, and educational data gathering. One component of the diagnosis includes an examination of the child's history through comprehensive interviews with parents, teachers, and health care professionals. Interviewing these individuals determines the child's specific behavior characteristics, when the behavior began, duration of symptoms, whether the child displays the behavior in various settings, and coexisting conditions. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) stresses that since a variety of psychological and developmental disorders frequently coexist in children who are being evaluated for ADHD, a thorough examination for any such coexisting condition should be an integral part of any evaluation (AAP, 2000). The focus of this **ADHD Series** will be to present the three most common evaluations used in the assessment of students with suspected ADHD: (1) Behavioral Evaluations; (2) Educational Evaluations; and (3) Medical Evaluations.

Behavioral Evaluations

Specific questionnaires and rating scales are used to review and quantify the behavioral characteristics of ADHD. The AAP has developed clinical practice guidelines for the diagnosis and evaluation of children with ADHD, and finds that such behavioral rating scales accurately distinguish between children with and without ADHD (AAP, 2000). Conversely, AAP recommends not using broadband rating scales or teacher global questionnaires in the diagnosis of children with ADHD. As with all psychological tests, child-rating scales have a range of measurement error. Appropriate scales have satisfactory norms for the child's chronological age and ability levels.

Collecting information about the child's ADHD symptoms from several different sources helps ensure that the information is accurate. Appropriate sources of information include the child's parents, teachers, and other diagnosticians such as psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, social workers, and physicians. It is also important to review both the child's previous medical history as well as his or her school records.

Educational Evaluations

An educational evaluation assesses the extent to which a child's symptoms of ADHD impair his or her academic performance at school. The evaluation involves direct observations of the child in the classroom as well as a review of his or her academic productivity. Behaviors targeted for classroom observation may include:

- Problems of inattention, such as becoming easily distracted, making careless mistakes, or failing to finish assignments on time
- Problems of hyperactivity, such as fidgeting, getting out of an assigned seat, running around the classroom excessively or striking out at a peer
- Problems of impulsivity, such as blurting out answers to the teacher's questions or interrupting the teacher or other students in the class
- More challenging behaviors, such as severe aggressive or disruptive behavior.

Classroom observations are used to record how often the child exhibits various ADHD symptoms in the classroom. The frequency with which the child with ADHD exhibits these and other target behaviors is compared to norms for other children of the same age and gender. It is also important to compare the behavior of the child with ADHD to the behaviors of other children in his or her classroom. It is best to collect this information during two or three different observations across several days. Each observation typically lasts about 20 to 30 minutes.

In order to receive special education and related services under Part B of IDEA, a child must be evaluated to determine (1) whether he or she has a disability and (2) whether he or she, because of the disability, needs special education and related services. The initial evaluation must be a full and individual evaluation that assesses the child in all areas related to the suspected disability and uses a variety of assessment tools and strategies.

A child who has ADHD may be eligible for special education and related services because he or she also meets the criteria for at least one of the disability categories, such as specific learning disability or emotional disturbance. It is important to note that the assessment instruments and procedures used by educational personnel to evaluate other disabilities such as learning disabilities may not be appropriate for the evaluation of ADHD. A variety of assessment tools and strategies must be used to gather relevant functional and developmental information about the child.

An educational evaluation also includes an assessment of the child's productivity in completing class work and other academic assignments. It is important to collect information about both the percentage of work completed as well as the accuracy of the work. The productivity of the child with ADHD can be compared to the productivity of other children in the class.

Once the observations and testing are complete, a group of qualified professionals and the parents of the child will review the results and determine if the child has a disability and whether the child needs special education and related services. Using this information, the child's IEP team, which includes the child's parents, will develop an individualized educational program that directly addresses the child's learning and behavior. If the child is recommended for evaluation and determined by the child's IEP team not to meet the eligibility requirements under IDEA, the child may be appropriate for evaluation under Section 504.

Medical Evaluations

A medical evaluation assesses whether the child is manifesting symptoms of ADHD, based on the following three objectives:

- To assess problems of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity that the child is currently experiencing
- To assess the severity of these problems
- To gather information about other disabilities that may be contributing to the child's ADHD symptoms.

Part B of IDEA does not necessarily require a school district to conduct a medical evaluation for the purpose of determining whether a child has ADHD. If a public agency believes that a medical evaluation by a licensed physician is needed as part of the evaluation to determine whether a child suspected of having ADHD meets the eligibility criteria of the OHI category, or any other disability category under Part B, the school district must ensure that this evaluation is conducted at no cost to the parents (OSEP Letter to Michel Williams, March 14, 1994, 21 IDELR 73).

In May 2000, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) published a clinical practice guideline that provides recommendations for the assessment and diagnosis of school-aged children with ADHD. The guideline, developed by a committee comprised of pediatricians and experts in the fields of neurology, psychology, child psychiatry, child development, and education, as well as experts in epidemiology and pediatrics, is intended for use by primary care clinicians who are involved in the identification and evaluation process. The recommendations are designed to provide a framework for diagnostic decision making and include the following:

- Medical evaluation for ADHD should be initiated by the primary care clinician.
- Questioning parents regarding school and behavioral issues, either directly or through a pre-visit questionnaire, may help alert physicians to possible ADHD.
- In diagnosing ADHD, physicians should use DSM-IV criteria.
- The assessment of ADHD should include information obtained directly from parents or caregivers, as well as a classroom teacher or other school professional, regarding the core symptoms of ADHD in various settings, the age of onset, duration of symptoms, and degree of functional impairment.
- Evaluation of a child with ADHD should also include assessment of co-existing conditions such as learning and language problems, aggression, disruptive behavior, depression, or anxiety.