

One Hand On The Door

(Answers to questions patients like to ask as they are leaving, with one hand on the door!)

Comorbidity and Psychiatric Diagnoses

A Comprehensive Assessment is necessary to identify co-existing conditions. For example, up to 50% of children with ADHD are suspected of having a learning disability. Many children with ADHD develop Oppositional-Defiant Disorder, and Major Depression.

Children who suffer from Anxiety, may also be depressed. Children with an Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder frequently manifest attentional problems and generalized anxiety. A variety of cognitive deficits are often a concern for children with Bipolar Disorder and Asperger's Disorder.

A Comprehensive Assessment will have sufficient variety and breadth of tests that educational, emotional, and cognitive issues will be identified.

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The Key Components of a Comprehensive Psychological and Neuropsychological Assessment

The most significant component of a Comprehensive Assessment, and sometimes the most overlooked, is the initial clinical interview, sometimes referred to as a Diagnostic Assessment. The Diagnostic Assessment involves interviewing parents and child, and reviewing intake questionnaires and relevant records. Standardized questionnaires are used to include teachers in the process. Information gathered during the clinical interview allows the Psychologist to determine if they are dealing primarily with learning, behavioral, developmental, or psychological issues, or in many cases, there may be concerns in more than one of these domains. Until a complete clinical picture is obtained, data from psychological and neuropsychological tests cannot be accurately interpreted. The Diagnostic Assessment assists the Psychologist in determining if testing is even appropriate, what tests should be administered, in what order, and the duration of any one testing session.

Once the Diagnostic interview is completed the clinician can move to the next stage of assessment, gathering of data using standardized tests and questionnaires. Diagnostic questions and treatment concerns, identified during the Diagnostic Assessment will determine which tests and questionnaires are used. Tests may evaluate attention, emotional functioning, academic skills, executive functioning, developmental levels, language, intellectual ability, memory, and a variety of other cognitive skills.

The selection of tests is critical. For children, almost every battery will need to include an assessment of intellectual functioning, academic ability, and screening for emotional problems. This "basic battery" will be augmented by a variety of other tests based on the child's needs and diagnoses under consideration. A "one size fits all" battery does not exist, and the use of a standard battery with each client is very problematic.

The Comprehensive Assessment is more than an evaluation. It is also an intervention that contributes to the child and parents coming to a new, or clearer, understanding of the presenting issues, and provides recommendations based on the conclusions drawn from the Assessment. Recommendations should address all aspects of the child's environment, including home, school, and recreational. Children with disabilities often need services and accommodations from their school district, and this should be covered in the Comprehensive Assessment as well.

To summarize, the Key Components of a Comprehensive Assessment are:

- Intake Questionnaire
- Diagnostic Assessment interview with child and parents
- Teacher Questionnaires
- Review of relevant records and prior assessments
- Standardized tests and standardized questionnaires
- Feedback appointment
- Report summarizing results, diagnosis, and recommendations

Adoptees Experience More Mental Health and Behavioral Issues

Early in my career my supervisor received a complaint from the parents of a child with whom I was working. The parents complained that I didn't like adoptees after I suggested adopted children tended to have more behavioral and emotional problems than biological children. That was over twenty years ago, and unfortunately recent research continues to support this observation. Adolescents who were adopted in infancy are almost twice as likely as their non-adopted peers to end up in counseling for a variety of emotional and behavioral problems. Unfortunately we still don't know why and disruptive behavior problems tend to be much more prevalent than emotional difficulties.

A study, published in the May, 2008 issue of the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, suggests that adolescent adoptees struggle more often with psychological and behavioral issues. The researchers assessed 692 adolescents, ages 11 to 21, who were adopted as infants (514 born outside the United States), and confirmed that adoptees tended to have higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems in adolescence. The study authors suggested that domestic adoptees tend to have more challenges than foreign adoptees. For example, 25 percent of domestic male adoptees were diagnosed as having, at some point in their childhood, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, compared with 12 percent of non-adoptees and 20 percent of international adoptees. Twenty-nine percent of domestically adopted boys had ADHD, compared with 8 percent of non-adopted adolescents and 19 percent of international adoptees. Proportions were similar among girls; although the prevalence of each of those syndromes was about one-third lower than for boys. These results are similar to the results obtained in earlier studies.

Over 120,000 children are adopted annually. It is important to note that most adoptees are doing just fine, and that may not have been the case if they'd not been given the opportunity to be adopted. It is also important for adoptive parents to be alert to the unique challenges their child may face, and provide them with mental health services. It is difficult for parents not to blame themselves when their children are having a tough time. Knowing that adoptees may experience more problems may help parents gain a balanced perspective about their child's difficulties.

Books for Children & Teens about Adoption

All About Adoption: How Families Are Made & How Kids Feel About It by Marc A. Nemiroff, Jane Annunziata, and Carol Koeller

Zachary's New Home: A Story for Adopted and Foster Children by Geraldine M. Blomquist, MSW & Paul Blomquist, & Illustrated by Margo Lemieux

Adopted: The Ultimate Teen Guide (It Happened to Me), Suzanne Buckingham Slade (Author), Christopher Papile (Illustrator), Mary Sandage (Illustrator), Odelia Witt (Illustrator), Chris Washburn (Photographer)