

# One Hand On The Door

## Psycho-educational, Psychological, or Neuropsychological Assessment?

The most appropriate assessment for any patient is one that is tailored to the individual. It is our philosophy that it is poor practice to determine in advance what tests or battery of tests are required before sufficient data is gathered. At ABHC we obtain information from parents, teachers, and the patients before we initiate testing. After a clinical interview, and thorough review of the information gathered, a determination is made about what tests should be administered. *An assessment may include psychoeducational, psychological, emotional, and neuropsychological tests, in order for it to be considered a complete and appropriate assessment.* Our goal is to provide the client with a correct diagnosis (where appropriate) and detailed recommendations for addressing their concerns.

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## “My Child’s Not Doing Well at School, and The School is Not Helping!”

Many states, including Texas, have adopted a *Response to Intervention (RTI)* approach to meeting the needs of children who have learning problems. While this approach has many positive benefits (e.g., more immediate, targeted support) it also means that children may not be assessed in a timely fashion and the support provided may not address the child’s needs. Therefore, it is likely that community based providers, including primary care physicians and mental health professionals, will see an increase in concerns about a child’s difficulties not being addressed by the school. Community based psychologists are not constrained by the Response to Intervention approach and can provide a more comprehensive and immediate assessment. A comprehensive assessment can provide a correct diagnosis, identify strengths and weaknesses, and contribute to the development of an appropriate intervention plan. This can often occur well before a school district has gone through all three tiers of a Response to Intervention program.

### When to Refer

Sometimes it is difficult for a counselor or physician to determine if a referral is appropriate. It can be less clear that a referral is needed when a parent or teacher is complaining about a child’s functioning at school. Clearly, if the same issue is being raised by a second or third teacher a referral to a psychologist for further assessment would be warranted. If a child’s academic performance is lagging more than six months behind his or her peers further assessment is likely needed. If a child’s school difficulties are affecting their mood, behavior, sleep, or appetite for more than two weeks further assessment, or at least a Diagnostic Assessment appointment, would be warranted. Sometimes, parents don’t raise issues of learning with the child’s physician. Instead they may talk about emotional or behavioral difficulties. *Immediate referral is warranted* if someone is aggressive, suicidal, is abusing drugs or alcohol, or there has been an extreme change in behavior. Referral is also appropriate if *any of the following persists longer than two weeks:* Restlessness and agitation, Feelings of worthlessness and guilt, Lack of enthusiasm and motivation, Fatigue or lack of energy, Difficulty concentrating, Thoughts of death or suicide, Sadness or hopelessness, Irritability, anger, or hostility, Tearfulness or frequent crying, Withdrawal from friends and family, Loss of interest in activities, or Changes in eating or sleeping habits.

Frequently, it is not clear that a child needs to be administered a full psychological battery. The community based psychologist will be able to take the time to complete a full initial clinical interview, or Diagnostic Assessment in order to determine if a full battery of tests is warranted. 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 concerns in more than one of these domains. Once the Diagnostic interview is completed the psychologist will be able to advise the parents what the best course of action will be. Sometimes parents are assured that the program implemented by the school is appropriate. Some children will benefit from counseling following the initial Diagnostic Assessment, and some children will require a full psychological battery of tests.

To summarize, community based mental health providers and primary care physicians are likely to experience an increase in concerns from parents about their child’s needs not being met by the child’s school. In many cases, the child’s school will be meeting the student’s needs by adhering to Response to Intervention guidelines. However, there are likely to be a substantial number of children who experience a delay getting necessary support, including a comprehensive psychological assessment, and counseling.

## School Stress

School is stressful for many students. While the vast majority of students are settling in, and even having fun in some cases, many students experience ongoing stress associated with school. In fact, school is the number one stressor for adolescents and many of the emotional difficulties we see in adolescents can be traced back to school stress. Of course a little bit of stress can be good for a student. It may motivate them to try harder, study for a test, or check their work. However, ongoing stress can create a variety of challenges for the young student and can be manifested as anxiety, anger, depression, peer problems, irritability, somatic complaints, and behavioral issues.

### Strategies for Dealing with School Stress

*Talk to the student:* Often dealing with a student’s stress can be quite simple. Having a conversation with a young student about what they like and don’t like about their school and how they feel about their peers and teachers may begin to reveal why they are stressed. If it’s still not clear why the child is stressed, or the child can’t be reassured and their feelings of stress reduced than a meeting at school may be appropriate. Sometimes children just need reassurance that parents and teachers are on their side and will work with them to ensure their academic success.

*Talk to your child’s teacher:* Parents should meet with their child’s teacher and/or a school administrator if the stress lasts for more than a few days and reasonable reassurance and problem solving with the child doesn’t provide any relief. Some situations require an immediate response and an immediate meeting with the school. Bullying, intimidation, feeling embarrassed by a teacher, are all situations that must be addressed at school.

*Time to relax:* Some situations need to be addressed by the parent. A review of the child’s schedule and extracurricular activities may be warranted. Children need to have time to play, unwind, and have interactions with parents that don’t just focus on school.

Perfectionism can cause a significant amount of stress, and in some cases perfectionistic children and teens may require counseling.

*Organization:* Helping a child get organized may also reduce feelings of stress. Make sure the child has a time and place to do their homework, usually understands their homework, and is able to organize their materials back into their backpack when homework is completed.

*Rest & Nutrition:* Parents need to make sure their child is getting adequate rest for their body. Adequate nutrition can also be a factor.

*Address learning needs:* Children often become stressed because they believe they are falling behind or don’t understand their academic work. It may be necessary to provide extra support for homework or additional breaks during homework. It may also be necessary to obtain tutoring or extra instruction from the teacher.

*Address social issues:* As noted, bullying or intimidation by a peer needs to be addressed immediately by school staff. If a child is talking about peer difficulties at school it may be helpful for the parent to follow up with the classroom teacher and school counselor. Ensure that the child has plenty of opportunities outside of school to interact with their peers.