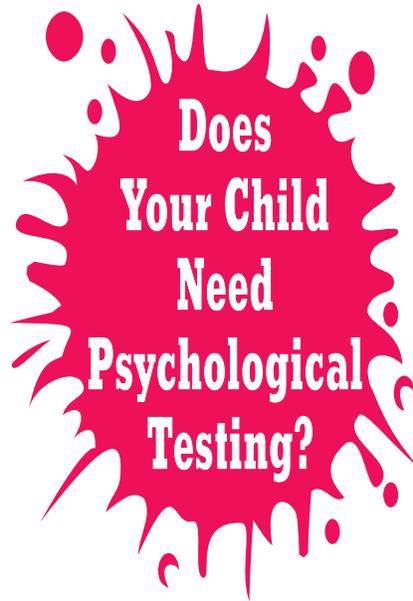


The WISER Family Column

A parent came to see me yesterday. She was very concerned about her seven-year-old son. As we sat and talked, I could see how upset she was. She admitted that she had gone through a period of such worry that she hadn't slept in days. She had always felt there was something different about Andrew (not his real name). He learned to read early and was already reading the Harry Potter books. He was a wiz at math. However he couldn't tell her about anything he had read when she tried to discuss books with him. He didn't talk much about what went on at school. When she tried to help him with a report about a book he loved, he almost broke down in tears. He said it was too hard for him and that he couldn't do it. Then last week his teacher called her, concerned. Andrew simply refused to do his work in school. The teacher said that the class had been asked to write in their journals, something they were expected to do every day this year. Andrew had become defiant and had refused to write. After school, this mom tried to talk to her son. Admittedly, she said, her first reaction was anger. In fact, she had felt angry with him for many months now, since doing homework had become more and more of a nightly struggle. When she sat and talked to him, Andrew began to cry. He said that writing in his journal was just too hard for him, and he couldn't do it. This mom confided in her friend, who suggested she give me a call. That was how we came to be in my office yesterday.

The scenario above describes a situation where psychological testing can be helpful. Such testing can be useful in describing a person's strengths and weaknesses. In their book *Straight Talk About Psychological Testing for Kids*, the authors, Braaten and Felopulos, write: "Testing is often used to help provide an explanation for a problem your child has. Testing is not always necessary for understanding what is wrong, but in many cases it proves essential for an accurate diagnosis and an appropriate treatment plan. Difficulty with writing, for example, can be attributable to a number of problems, such as fine-motor muscle weakness, visual-motor integration delays, problems generating ideas, organization difficulties, or inattention. Without the right kind of testing, you won't know what the cause of the problem is nor whether it's possible to eradicate the cause and thereby eliminate the problem, or, if not, what kind of intervention will improve your child's success with writing." This is just one example. Behavior that appears to be related to attentional problems can be caused by issues such as not understanding the language that is being used, not having enough sleep, or by being very sad. Careful testing can help determine the underlying cause of the behavior, as well as inform adults how best to be helpful. In the case that



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was described at the beginning of this article, it seems very possible from the mother's description that rather than being oppositional and defiant, her son may have a learning disability. Psychological testing can shed light on the cause of his difficulty, and will help point the way for him to get assistance while at the same time allowing him to build on his significant strengths.

WHAT ARE SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS THAT SHOULD CAUSE A PARENT TO CONSIDER HAVING TESTING DONE?

Braaten and Felopulos write that the following specific problems with school should trigger concern:

- Difficulty learning the letters and the sounds associated with them by age 3
- Difficulty paying attention or following directions

- Difficulty doing grade level work at any age
- Gaps in skills or inconsistent grades
- Difficulty remembering things/organization problems
- A drop in grades
- Consistent difficulty completing homework
- Never enough time to complete tests
- Saying he/she hates school and refusing to go

In addition, consistent behavior problems, such as the following, should also be reason to consider having psychological testing: frequent temper tantrums after the age of 3, aggressive or destructive behavior, extreme or frequent moodiness or irritability, frequent sleeping difficulties and/or nightmares, frequent worrying, loss of interest in friends and social activities, and talk of wanting to die. While not a complete list, it is a sample of some of the behaviors to look for when deciding if your child should be evaluated.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTING?

During an evaluation, a child is given a series of tests that are designed to evaluate all aspects of his or her functioning, such as feelings, behavior, and thinking and learning skills. A summary report details your child's areas of strength, weakness and overall functioning, as well as offering helpful suggestions for home and school support.

Two books recommended for further reading about psychological testing are: *Straight Talk about Your Child's Mental Health: What to do When Something Seems Wrong* by Dr. Stephen V. Faraone, 2003, The Guilford Press and *Straight Talk about Psychological Testing for Kids* by Ellen Braaten, Ph.D. and Gretchen Felopulos, Ph.D., 2004, The Guilford Press.

If you are considering such testing, it is a good idea to talk to your child's doctor for recommendations on how to proceed. Sometimes testing can be done through the school system at no charge to you. There are also many private practice psychologists who perform such testing. ❖

Washington Independent Services for Educational Resources (WISER) members work to improve educational services and promote child advocacy by providing resources to children and parents. Please visit www.wiserdc.com or call 301-816-0432 to find a specialist to work with your child and family. Judith M. Glasser, Ph.D., a member of the WISER group, is a clinical psychologist in Rockville, MD. She can be reached at 301-610-6300 or judithglasser@verizon.net.