

Understanding Neuropsychological Testing

A Guide for Parents

If it feels like more and more families are pursuing neuropsychological evaluations, you're not imagining it. Many parents share the same questions: *What does this actually mean? Is something wrong? And now what?* This handout walks through the basics.

What Is a Neuropsychological Evaluation?

A neuropsychological evaluation (sometimes called a **psychoeducational evaluation** in school settings) is a comprehensive look at how your child's brain affects what they think, do, and feel. It is **not** a search for what's wrong with your child — it's a way to truly get to know them: their strengths, their challenges, and how their brain actually works.

WHAT THE EVALUATION LOOKS AT

Problem-solving and reasoning — how your child thinks through new challenges

Memory — how information is taken in, held onto, and retrieved

Executive functioning — how efficiently the brain gets things done, and how much energy that takes

Emotional functioning — how your child feels, copes, and regulates

Along with testing, the evaluator interviews the child, parents, and teachers — because the goal is to understand how your child functions *across environments*, not just in one room on one afternoon.

Signs an Evaluation Might Help

If a teacher, coach, or other caring adult suggests an evaluation, take it seriously. And if *you* sense something is off before anyone else names it — trust your gut. Signs can look like:

- **Younger children:** missing developmental milestones or not functioning at the level of their peers
- **School-age kids:** working much harder than they should have to, even if grades look fine
- Falling apart after school when the teacher reports everything is “fine”
- Procrastinating or avoiding in ways that feel out of proportion
- Coming home genuinely depleted, day after day

Kids are deeply motivated to appear competent in front of their peers, and they can hold it together at school — at a real cost. The after-school meltdown may be a signal that your child is working much harder than anyone realizes.

“We all have a certain amount of energy units to get through the day. If you are using more of them than most of your peers just to do the basics, you come home and you are depleted.”

— Dr. Joanna Jacobs, licensed psychologist

It's Not Only for Kids Who Are Struggling

Schools are largely built around verbal, language-based learning — which works beautifully for one kind of learner and is genuinely hard for everyone else. Kids without those strengths can move through school quietly convinced something is wrong with them; an evaluation can interrupt that story. It also matters for the child who seems “just fine” — the quiet student with extraordinary visual-spatial reasoning who is never given the language to understand what they're good at. An evaluation is for any child whose full picture hasn't been seen.

Diagnosis vs. Profile: Know the Difference

Many parents go into the feedback meeting waiting to hear a diagnosis — and miss the most valuable part of the conversation.

THE DIAGNOSIS	THE PROFILE
A label (ADHD, dyslexia, anxiety) that serves practical purposes: • Enables insurance reimbursement • Unlocks school services and accommodations • Gives clinicians a shared shorthand But a diagnosis is not descriptive — ADHD can mean something completely different for every child who has it.	The real story of your child: • Which behaviors are concerning, and why they're happening • How your child's brain works • Where it's working hardest • Where their strengths lie This is what actually tells you how to help your child — listen closely for it.

Keep in mind, too, that a diagnosis is **environment-specific**. Place a child with a learning difference in a setting that demands exactly what they can't do, and it looks like a disorder. Place the same child where their strengths are valued, and they thrive.

“Disorder is a symptom of a misfit between the kid and his environment. I really believe we need all those brains.”

— Dr. Joanna Jacobs

Talking With Your Child About It

The most common fear parents bring is: *I don't want my child to hear that something is wrong with them.* But the more information stays in the shadows, the scarier it gets. Most kids already know something feels different — and their imagination has usually filled in something worse than the truth. Naming it doesn't pathologize; it connects. It says: **you're not alone in this.**

Many families find the word **neurodivergent** helpful: *your brain works differently than the setting you're in. It's going to feel harder sometimes — and that doesn't mean you're not capable. It means the environment isn't built for you, yet.*

One caveat: if a child is doing well, feels good about themselves, and isn't aware of any struggle, there's no rush to hand them a label. The gauge is always: how much is the child suffering? When the suffering is there, naming it is a gift.

Sharing Results With the School

Parents often worry a label will follow their child forever. A good general approach: give the school the benefit of the doubt — with good information, they can help your child. But you have more control than you might think. Some families share the full profile (every observation, every recommendation) while leaving the diagnosis itself off the report: *you have everything you need to support this child — why do you also need a label?*

THE BOTTOM LINE
An evaluation won't solve everything — but it gives you language, a clearer picture of your child, and a way to help them understand themselves. It does not mean your child won't be successful. As Dr. Jacobs puts it, a neuropsych report is “a map and an opportunity.”

Based on a conversation with Dr. Joanna Jacobs, licensed psychologist specializing in the evaluation of children, adolescents, and young adults, featured on the Raising Good Humans podcast.