Assessing and Addressing Learning Difficulties

What are Learning Difficulties?

A learning difficulty consists of difficulties with one or more basic cognitive processes involved in understanding, remembering, or expressing information. Learning difficulties often cause academic underperformance and challenges in daily life. The most common learning difficulties involve reading, spelling, spoken language or mathematics. It is possible to have a specific difficulty in one of these areas while having average or above average performance in others.

Signs of a Learning Difficulty

Learning difficulties are often first observed in a child's early years. Signs may include difficulties with spoken language, attention, and memory. In many cases difficulties also become apparent at school during specific learning activities such as reading, speaking or mathematics. In adults, learning difficulties are often identified through vocational or work-based assessments, or other language-based evaluations.

Cognitive Assessments

What is an IQ Test?

Psychologists administer intelligence tests to assess an individual's cognitive functioning and general intelligence. The assessment used depends on the age of the individual:

- The Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI-IV) is used with children aged 2 to 7 years.
- The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-V) is used with children aged 6 to 16 years.
- The Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS-IV) is used with adults aged 16 to 90 years.

Why Would I Complete an IQ Test?



IQ tests, such as a WISC-5 are commonly used to help understand performance in a range of cognitive abilities and mental attributes, including academic achievement, intellectual giftedness, learning difficulties, and aspects of neurological functioning. Results can provide a framework for developing educational support plans and informing future academic or vocational decisions.

It is important to note that IQ tests measure specific cognitive abilities at a point in time. While they provide standardised, norm-referenced information about relative strengths and weaknesses, results should always be interpreted by a qualified psychologist in the context of the individual's broader clinical presentation and life circumstances.

An IQ assessment typically takes one to two hours to complete and is often used alongside other clinical assessments. Combined results can help inform an

individual's support needs and assist in evaluating the effectiveness of intervention over time.

Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-III)

Psychologists can also assess academic achievement using the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-III), which measures performance in reading, writing and mathematics. The WIAT is suitable for children, adolescents, and adults (typically ages 4 to 50+) and is a standardised tool, meaning an individual's scores are compared to a large, nationally representative sample.

What Does the WIAT Measure?

The WIAT evaluates the following key academic skills:

- Reading (word reading and reading comprehension)
- Mathematics (problem solving and numerical operations)
- Written Language (spelling, sentence composition and essay writing)
- Oral Language (listening comprehension and oral expression)

How Is the WIAT Helpful?

The WIAT provides an objective measure of how someone is performing academically relative to their peers. It is used in educational and clinical settings to:

- Identify patterns of academic performance consistent with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, or written expression disorder, helping to guide intervention planning
- Track progress over time and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions
- Inform eligibility for special education services or accommodations on standardised tests

Are There Any Concerns or Risks Involved in IQ or WIAT Testing?

Psychological testing is generally well tolerated. Some individuals experience mild anxiety before or during testing, which is a normal response to an unfamiliar evaluation process. It is worth noting that significant anxiety on the day may affect performance, and this will be taken into account by the assessing psychologist when

interpreting results. If you have concerns about how anxiety might affect your assessment, discuss this with your psychologist beforehand.

Is There Anything That Can Help on the Day?

Being well-rested and having eaten beforehand can support performance on the day. Breathing, relaxation, or mindfulness techniques may help manage pre-test anxiety. Your psychologist can also provide guidance on what to expect from the assessment process prior to testing.

What Happens After the Test?

Results are scored and interpreted by a psychologist and compiled into a written report,generally completed within two to three weeks, depending on assessment complexity and workload. Once the report is finalised, a feedback session will be scheduled to discuss the results, answer questions, and explore any recommendations arising from the assessment.

Supporting Individuals with Learning Difficulties

Personalised Support for Students and Adults

Our focus is on helping individuals develop practical tools and strategies to manage learning difficulties more effectively, both academically and in daily life. For students, this means building skills that support participation at school and at home. For adults, similar support is available to help manage challenges in home and work environments. Our approach involves developing a tailored plan that addresses each person's individual needs and circumstances.

Practical strategies are used to reduce the impact of learning difficulties. For example, a child who finds writing challenging might be encouraged to present reports orally in class. Students who struggle to focus may benefit from environmental adjustments such as sitting closer to the teacher. These strategies help make daily learning more manageable.

Where difficulties are more significant, targeted remediation may be recommended. This might involve tutoring focused on specific subjects such as maths or reading, or

support for general study skills. Practising these skills at home, in partnership with families, can contribute meaningfully to progress. Where learning challenges are accompanied by emotional or behavioural concerns, psychological therapy may be recommended to address issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, or social difficulties.

Collaboration with Schools

Meaningful progress often requires a team approach. Where appropriate, we work with teachers and school staff to recommend adjustments that support each child's learning. This may include recommending classroom accommodations, providing organisational support, adjusting instructional approaches, or advising on how teaching materials are delivered. The goal is to support every student's participation, confidence and learning within their school community.

Empowering Parents and Families

Parents play an important role in their child's learning journey. We provide guidance that equips parents to support skill development at home, helping their child build on their strengths. Parents can also learn strategies to introduce and reinforce positive coping approaches, making them active participants in their child's progress.

Where family dynamics are contributing to a child's difficulties, family therapy may be recommended as part of a broader intervention plan. Working together, families can develop more effective ways to communicate, manage conflict, and support one another, creating a supportive environment that extends beyond the clinic or therapy setting.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between a learning difficulty and a learning disorder?+

"Learning difficulty" is a broad term for any ongoing challenge with learning, while "specific learning disorder" is a formal diagnostic term (e.g. dyslexia,

dyscalculia, or written expression disorder) reached through comprehensive psychological and academic assessment.

What tests are used to assess learning difficulties?+

Assessment typically combines a cognitive test (such as the WPPSI, WISC-V or WAIS-IV, depending on age) with academic achievement testing (such as the WIAT), which together identify a person's cognitive profile and how it relates to their reading, writing, and mathematics performance.

At what age can learning difficulties be assessed?+

Learning difficulties can be assessed from early childhood through to adulthood. Different cognitive tests are used depending on age — the WPPSI-IV for ages 2 to 7, the WISC-V for ages 6 to 16, and the WAIS-IV for ages 16 and above.

Can learning difficulties be treated, or only managed?+

Learning difficulties are generally lifelong, but their impact can be significantly reduced through tailored strategies, accommodations, and, where relevant, psychological support for associated anxiety or self-esteem concerns. Early identification and support lead to the best outcomes.

Do I need a referral for a learning difficulty assessment?+

A referral is not required to book an assessment, but a referral and Mental Health Care Plan from your GP, or a referral from a paediatrician or psychiatrist, may make you eligible for a Medicare rebate on relevant sessions.

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