

FOR CAREGIVERS

Understanding the Medical and the Educational Models of Autism Evaluation



Autism spectrum disorder is a condition that affects how people communicate and behave and includes the presence of specific patterns of behavior and interests. There are two main ways to evaluate children for autism:

1. Medical/Clinical Evaluation

This is a medical evaluation where a doctor, psychologist or other specialist does testing to see if a child has a clinical diagnosis of autism.

2. School-Based Evaluation

This is a school-based evaluation where a team of educational experts does testing to see if the student has an educational disability that is affecting their learning. It helps decide if a student qualifies for special education services.

Even though these evaluations have different approaches, they are quite similar in many ways. This tip sheet will explain both types of evaluations and offer tips on how to work with your child's school when a medical autism evaluation is involved.

WHAT IS A MEDICAL AUTISM EVALUATION?

Medical or clinical autism evaluation is usually done in a clinic or hospital setting where a clinician does some testing and asks you questions to see if your child has autism and if so, connects you and your child to resources and supports that can help.

- **Purpose:** A medical evaluation helps find out if your child has any medical or developmental concerns and if those concerns fit with an autism diagnosis. The goal is to determine your child's strengths and areas of need and connect you to services that will help your child succeed.
- **During the Evaluation:** Depending on your child's age and needs, they might work with a doctor or psychologist. These experts will talk to you and observe and interact with your child to understand how their development might be different from other kids their age.
- **After the Evaluation:** You'll get advice on what might help your child, like therapy, community, and school resources. Sometimes, you might need to visit again for more testing.

WHAT IS A SCHOOL-BASED AUTISM EVALUATION?

If your child is between the ages of 3 and 22-years-old and you notice that your child has difficulties such as talking or communicating, interacting with others, or engaging in activities, you have the right to obtain, at no cost to you, an autism evaluation from your local school system. This evaluation helps to see if your child needs specialized instruction and supports to learn and engage in the classroom and school environment.

- **Purpose:** The evaluation finds out if a child's needs affect their learning, social interactions, and overall engagement in school. This can include issues with schoolwork, social skills, or other important areas. The goal is to identify the child's programming needs, so they can receive appropriate educational supports to help them succeed in school.
- **During the Evaluation:** The school has a team of experts, including teachers, psychologists, and speech and language pathologists who will conduct an evaluation to determine eligibility in order for your child to receive special education services.
- **After the Evaluation:** The team will share the data and determine if your child qualifies for extra support. While some children require special education services, like an Individualized Education Program (IEP), some children might just require extra support in the classroom, a 504 plan, or a behavior support plan (TDOE, 2018).

WHAT IF YOUR CHILD HAS A MEDICAL DIAGNOSIS OF AUTISM?

Not every child with a medical diagnosis of autism requires special help at school.

Sometimes, children get private therapy but do fine in school. To find out if your child could benefit from help at school, you should ask the school about a school-based psychoeducational evaluation (TDOE, 2018).

If you bring a medical report saying your child has autism to the school, the school team needs to consider how it might affect your child's learning.

Upon consideration, the school might:

- accept the medical evaluation report and ask for your permission to do more testing to determine whether your child meets eligibility for special education, or
- determine that your child does not qualify for special education services based on their current needs in school.

SUMMARY

There are two main ways to evaluate children for autism. Medical evaluations look at differences in a child's development, while school evaluations focus on how these differences affect learning and engagement in school. Both types of evaluations aim to identify the right services to help your child succeed.

RESOURCES

Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) (2018). Autism Evaluation Guidance Document. [tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/special-education/eligibility/se_autism_evaluation_guidance.pdf](https://content.dam/tn/education/special-education/eligibility/se_autism_evaluation_guidance.pdf)

REFERENCES

Christensen, D., & Zubler, J. (2020). CE: From the CDC: Understanding autism spectrum disorder. *American Journal of Nursing*, 120(10), 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NAJ.0000718628.09065.1b>