

FOR EDUCATORS

Understanding the Medical and the Educational Models of Autism Evaluation



Autism spectrum disorder is a condition characterized by differences in social communication and the presence of restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests (CDC, 2020). There are different ways students can be evaluated for autism. One way is through a school-based evaluation, where a student must meet criteria under the special education category of autism and where adverse educational impact must be present, or how the student's disability is affecting their access to the general education curriculum. The second way is through a medical diagnostic evaluation, where a student receives a medical diagnosis. Although one may think these two types of evaluations are very different, they are quite similar. This tip sheet will describe both the medical and educational models of autism evaluation, including ways of partnering with families when you receive a medical or outside evaluation.

UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL AND MEDICAL MODELS OF AUTISM EVALUATION

Schools often receive medical evaluations or evaluations from a private provider, where a student has received a medical or clinical diagnosis of autism. Therefore, it can be helpful to know and understand the differences and similarities between a medical diagnosis and an educational classification of autism.

1. Medical Diagnosis

When it comes to medical diagnosis, clinicians are looking at two primary things: overall clinical differences across settings and the presence of autism characteristics, both currently and historically.

2. Educational Classification

When it comes to educational classification for autism, school teams are looking at whether a student meets criteria under the special education category of autism and whether adverse educational impact is present, or whether the student's educational performance is impacted by their disability to such a degree that the student requires specially designed instruction. Those are the two questions school teams must answer to determine if a student is eligible to receive special education services under the category of autism.

Because autism is inherently a developmental condition, understanding the history of a child's developmental trajectory is essential, whether one is conducting a medical or a school-based autism evaluation. Despite the differences between a medical diagnosis of autism and an educational classification of autism, the evaluation process and the assessment measures used are very similar.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU RECEIVE A MEDICAL DIAGNOSTIC EVALUATION REPORT

Often parents wait months to years for a medical or clinical evaluation for autism. When they bring this evaluation report to their child's school, it can be jarring to hear that their child must go through another evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services. It can be helpful to talk through the following when you receive a medical evaluation report from a caregiver.

➤ First, thank the caregiver(s) and validate efforts made to receive this evaluation. Let them know that you appreciate them sharing this report with you. Reassure them that everyone is on the same team, and your goal is to work together to make sure their child's needs are met.

➤ Next, inform the caregiver(s) that the school will **consider** information from the medical report.

Point out that sometimes children who have a medical diagnosis do not need an educational classification. However, information gleaned from the medical report will help support their process.

➤ Inform the caregiver(s) that as part of the psychoeducational evaluation, you may ask for more information about their child, which might involve more testing. Explain that additional information will be used to inform services and supports to address their child's needs in the school setting.

➤ Finally, inform the caregiver(s) that the psychoeducational evaluation will help determine whether their child:

- needs special education services,
- might not need special education services but may need other classroom or school-

based supports (e.g., 504 plan, behavior plan, tutoring, additional school-wide tiered supports, or interventions), or

- does not need other services to make progress in the general education setting and can continue in their current classroom.

SUMMARY

There are more similarities than differences between the medical autism evaluation process and the special education autism evaluation process.

In addition to determining whether a student has a disability, the school-based autism evaluation process also assesses adverse educational impact or whether the student requires specially designed instruction to make progress in the areas of: academic, social/emotional, cognitive, communication, vocational and independent living skills.

When you receive a medical diagnostic evaluation from a family, always remember to thank caregivers for sharing the medical diagnostic evaluation report with you.

Assure caregivers that information from the report will be considered, but that not all students with a medical diagnosis of autism require specially designed instruction in school.

If there are concerns in the school setting, communicate to caregivers that a school-based evaluation may be warranted.

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>

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