



APSEA

Atlantic Provinces
Special Education Authority

Considerations When Using Formal Assessment Tools with Learners who are Deaf and / or Hard of Hearing

Introduction

The diversity among learners who are Deaf, deaf and/or hard of hearing (DHH) requires a thoughtful approach to formal and diagnostic assessment. There is no single assessment tool or approach that works for all learners who are DHH. This document outlines some of the considerations when working with this population of learners through an assessment process.

Professional Collaboration

The varied skills and needs of learners who are DHH require a skilled and knowledgeable team of professionals to deliver appropriate standardized assessments.

- A collaborative team including school team members, school assessor, APSEA Education Support Teachers (EST) – DHH, other APSEA team members, family members, and learner if appropriate, will benefit the learner and the overall assessment results.
- Areas of consultative support and discussions should include, but are not limited to:
 - Understanding the impact of age of onset on the varied hearing levels,
 - Understanding the impact of early language access,
 - Understanding the various forms of communication and language choices,
 - Understanding the relationship between child development and varied hearing levels,
 - Understanding the use of assistive hearing and communication technologies,
 - Understanding the impact of co-existing conditions.
- Multiple sources of information should be considered when making assessment and programming decisions:
 - Formative assessment results, such as checklists, work samples, graphic organizers, conferencing, and informal observations.
 - Summative assessment results, such as tests or quizzes, final portfolios, and standardized assessment tools.
 - All relevant domains should be addressed within the assessments and educational services including linguistic, social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development.
 - “The use of multiple (assessment) methods, settings and opportunities is important to reducing error and enhancing generalization” (Braden, 2017, p. 55).

Test Administration – Communication Environment

Language and communication require specific attention when working with learners who are DHH. Addressing these aspects appropriately helps prevent discrimination and contributes to accurate assessment results. Communication is a two-way process, involving both the learner's methods of communication, and the adaptations and considerations made by the assessment team.

Language & Communication Considerations

Learners who are DHH are a dynamic group with specific language considerations. Some learners may use one or more methods of communication: simultaneously, consecutively, or for receptive and expressive purposes.

- **American Sign Language (ASL):** A visual language made up of specific gestures (signs), hand shapes and facial expressions. It has its own unique grammatical rules and sentence structure.
- **Auditory/Oral Language:** Using hearing and speech to develop spoken language for expressive and receptive communication.
- **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC):** Using communication devices, systems, strategies and tools that replace or support spoken language, including both aided and unaided tools or materials.

With these examples alone highlighting the variability of language and communication needs, the learner's "primary language(s) or preferred mode(s) of communication should be considered the most critical issue" (Bell & Nicholai, 2017, p.4) when selecting assessment tools and/or subtests. "Depending on the (learner's English) verbal abilities, administration of verbally based subtests can be appropriate" (Douglas, Lawson, Mauermann, Rosenthal, & Santa-Teresa, 2011, p.2). However, due to the impact of hearing levels, age of amplification, and/or language access, specific scores on such subtests "should not be perceived as a measure of verbal cognitive skills" (Douglas, et.al., 2011, p.2). Results from verbally based subtests may provide helpful information regarding program planning and intervention development, rather than diagnostic. Such practices underscore the importance of collecting and considering various sources of data to ensure fair and representative assessment findings.

Working with Sign Language Interpreters

Providing an accessible testing environment by reducing barriers requires a strong understanding of the learner's preferred language and communication modes. Maintaining accessible communication throughout the assessment process reduces the risk of

discrimination by assuring that both the learner and the assessor have the necessary linguistic access.

For learners whose preferred mode of communication is ASL, a sign language interpreter is required to provide access to both the ASL and English components within the testing environment. The sign language interpretation should maintain the meaning and purpose of the English-based test while the message is being delivered in ASL. Sign language interpretation should not lead to answers, simplify or change the intended nature of a task.

The following considerations will better support the assessment process when working with a sign language interpreter:

- The focus remains with the learner, not the interpreter. The interpreter is present to facilitate communication rather than participate.
- Providing a linguistically accessible environment may affect the amount of time required for the assessment. Pacing may need to be adjusted to accommodate both ASL and English in the process.

Meet with the interpreter both prior to and following the assessment to discuss the following:

- Understand the role of the interpreter.
- Discuss the assessment tools that will be used and their area of focus or measurement.
- Collaborate “with the interpreter to determine what content can be interpreted or how it should be presented” (AssistiveWare, n.d., p.2).
- Clarify if “the interpreter is to interpret the learner’s exact response, modify the response to account for cultural differences, or fill in any gaps to clarify the response” (Bell & Nicholai, 2017, p.2).
- “Have familiarity with “testing-of-limits” procedure and additional “teaching-of-task” requirements” (Douglas, et.al., 2011, p.3) as these techniques may be needed if the learner requires additional explanation or demonstration of a task. While such practices may make the results invalid or unreliable, helpful information may be gained to further develop the learner’s program plan.

To understand the overall reliability and validity of the assessment results, the education team must consider how the interpretation process may have affected the assessment process. Consideration and acknowledgment that the assessment tool was interpreted and working in a learner’s additional language, should ASL be their first language, are required to ensure a fair evaluation of the learner’s abilities and skills. “If the evaluator uses techniques that are not included in the standardization of the test battery, be sure to report what was done along with the possible implications” (Douglas, et.al., 2011, p.4).

Test Administration – Physical Environment

The collaborative team working with the learner who is DHH must ensure equitable testing that accurately reflects the learner’s abilities. This requires consideration of test accessibility and the testing environment.

- The testing environment should be free from visual and auditory distractions.
- The testing space should be arranged to maximize the learner’s visual access to the assessment tool(s) and test administrator.
- If the learner uses personal access technology (e.g., hearing aids, cochlear implant, personal DM system, LiveTranscribe tablet), ensure that it/these are in good working order at the time of testing.

For additional information, refer to the following APSEA documents:

- [Working with Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#)
- [Considerations when working with Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing](#)

Tool Selection & Normative Data

Few formal assessment tools are developed with the specific consideration of learners who are DHH. Additionally, only a small number of assessment tools have normative data with this population. Further complicating these considerations are factors such as: the low incidence of learners who are DHH, the heterogeneity of this population due to such factors as the impact and timing of hearing levels, language access, and/or amplification use, and the high incidence of additional needs or diagnoses.

The school psychologist, with support from the rest of the education team, ensures that assessment samples and validity studies are aligned with the individual learner’s background. “When standardized assessment instruments lack appropriate norms, the psychologist should attempt to find instruments that maximize collection of valid information and to consult test manuals and publishers for potential application information” (APA Task Force on Guidelines for Assessment and Intervention with Persons with Disabilities, 2022, p.30).

A key consideration is the language demands of each subtest, including the instructions, within a standardized tool. Factors such as hearing levels, age of onset, access to amplification and language development significantly affect language skills and abilities. Therefore, each subtest should be reviewed to determine if the learner will need to rely on language-based skills or strategies, and to “clearly define the constructs (the subtests) intend to measure” (Braden, 2017, p.53) before starting the test.

Professional Learning & Critical Judgement

Through collaborative discussions, each member of the educational team contributes their expertise to support the learner and their family. The APSEA team shares their knowledge on hearing levels, amplification and assistive resources, language development, and other key aspects of the learner's growth and experiences. School team members offer insights on educational settings, academic strengths and needs, and program outcomes. School psychologists ensure the use of reliable and valid psychological assessment tools and methods to guide appropriate assessment practices.

Education team members gain from professional development, enhancing their knowledge and skills in working with individuals with various disabilities, hearing levels, and other differences, ensuring appropriate assessment practices. "There is unanimity among experts that expert clinical judgment is needed to understand and interpret assessment results" (Braden, 2017, p.53). Through ongoing professional learning, team members gain critical judgement skills, explore assessment practices, and gain a better understanding of tools that are normed on both hearing and Deaf or hard of hearing learners.

Conclusion

Standardized assessments can play an important role in program planning for learners who are DHH. Understanding the variability and complexity of strengths and needs for learners who are DHH improves the validity and application of the assessment results. "Given the diversity of the Deaf and hard of hearing population, there is not a single assessment approach that works for all children" (Day, Costa, & Raiford, 2015, p.1). When working with learners who are DHH, testing and programming equity "must recognize and integrate each student's culture, language, and individuality in all services" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020, p.1).

Formal assessment tools may not always be the appropriate programming choice for learners who are DHH. Observational data, work samples, interviews, checklists, and other informal assessment options may be able to provide the education team with sufficient data to create responsive and appropriate programming for the learner. Ultimately, an assessment should contribute to the learner's well-being and should be seen as a process rather than a report with recommendations. Through a collaborative approach, education team members should consider various factors to develop a program plan that represents the learner's strengths and needs appropriately, fairly, and accurately.

References & Resources

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