General Guidelines for Assessing Students with Low-Incidence Disabilities

When assessing students with low-incidence disabilities, it is important to remember that the purpose of assessment is to gain an accurate understanding of their functioning across domains and settings. IQ scores may be inaccurate and provide, by themselves, incomplete information. Moreover, the students usually qualify for special education services based on their hearing loss, vision loss, or concomitant disabilities. To this end, all measures used in assessment should be chosen specifically for the purpose of understanding student strengths and needs, rather than for obtaining merely a numerical score.

Guidelines for Providing for the Student’s Physical and Emotional Comfort

- Accept each student’s attitude towards testing. Acknowledge the student’s frustration with a phrase such as, “These are getting difficult, but try them anyway.”
- If students show undue stress during timed tests, discontinue, or give the test without timing it. Be aware that you may need to deal with heightened anxiety during timed portions of assessments. Eliminating time limits when appropriate will allow you to see if the student can eventually work out the problem without time constraints.
- Balance the comfort of students with standardized procedures of the test, documenting any adjustments made and considering those adjustments during interpretation.
- If possible, evaluate students in a setting that is familiar to them.
- Ask them if they need help and allow them to accept or refuse.
- Explain at the beginning that some items will be easy and some will be very difficult.
- Arrange activities so students intermittently experiences successes, administering two or three more difficult subtests followed by an activity that students enjoy or feel comfortable with.
- Give students time to acclimate to the surroundings.
- Position students in their preferred way, generally sitting next to the student rather than across the desk (for students with visual impairments or significant support needs only).
- Acknowledge students’ efforts and make other pleasant remarks.
- Be sensitive to students’ needs. Take short breaks as needed or when the student looks extremely bored, tired, or uncomfortable.
- Be attentive to other needs such as hunger or pain and discomfort.
Make sure students have access to their normal adaptive equipment.
Be aware of multicultural issues that may effect students’ demeanor and performance during the assessment.
Arrange for the assessment to be done at an optimal time during the day, while considering medication issues, fatigue, etc.
Make sure the student’s feet are grounded on the floor or a solid surface and not dangling in the air.

Guidelines for Communication

- Learn about student’s preferred mode of communication and physical capabilities before testing.
- Speak directly to students, not to a parent, assistant, or interpreter.
- Use person first language.
- Use respectful, appropriate language and tone according to students’ chronological age and ability. (i.e. no baby talk).
- Accept student’s typical means of communication (i.e., vocalizations and signs, communication devices – high or low tech, etc.).
- If student uses facilitative communication, do not act as facilitator – observe everything.
- Allow appropriate wait time for responses.
- Use clear, concise language.
- Provide an explanation for the student about what is happening, most specifically when transitioning.
- Ask parents during the parent interview about signs, signals, or gestures that their child understands or uses.
- Explain the standardized procedures used and their rationale to parents or others, if present. Let them know that you do not expect their child to pass all of the test items, acknowledging that some items will be too difficult.
- Verbally cue the student that you are ready to start a test by saying or indicating “Ready?”

Test Selection

- Base the assessment of students’ cognitive functioning on multiple sources of information.
- Select tests that are appropriate for students’ functional abilities after observing their challenges or limitations.
- Use other tests designed for the special populations to supplement standardized tests.
- Collaborate with the student’s teacher(s) in designing assessment and interpreting results.
- Include normal school tasks and concept tests in the assessment process to supplement results from standardized tests. Select and administer tests solely for the purpose of gaining information that will best contribute to appropriate and beneficial education plans.
- View the assessment as an ongoing process following students over time, rather than as a single event.
When standardized, norm-referenced instruments are not appropriate, use whatever instruments are necessary to determine the students’ levels of functioning. *Alternative Assessment* is often the most appropriate and helpful approach to assessing these students (see the resource webpage).

**Maximizing Accurate Assessment Results**

- Remain flexible and empathetic while maintaining focused on the process and outcomes of assessments.
- Make sure students have access to their normal adaptive equipment.
- Make sure students understand the test directions fully throughout the testing process.
- Know the test procedures completely so you can give students your full attention.
- If student is accustomed to receiving tangible reinforcers, provide those with parent’s permission.
- Try to test during the time of day when the student is usually most alert.
- Remove all distractions from the testing room.
- Use parent interviews to further assess the student’s functioning.
- Collaborate closely with the student’s teacher in understanding and interpreting results.
- Use a low level of inference. Especially avoid definitive statements about prognosis and stability of intelligence. Use extreme caution when reporting and interpreting scores based on only portions of a test (e.g., the verbal scale of the WISC-IV).
- Give the range of performance instead of single scores when reporting results.
- Qualify if scores are questionable for any reason.
- Report the age of the test if more than 15 years old and be aware of possible inflation of test scores due to age of test.
- Follow-up on recommendations given.
- Make sure the assessment is individualized for the student and that procedures utilized are reproducible by other professionals.
- Focus on students’ presenting problem and make use of parents’ observations of their child’s skills and behaviors.
- Realize that a student’s life is embedded within a cultural and family context. When assessing the student, it is essential to consider the family’s culture, parent priorities, parenting styles, and family support systems.¹