Process Information for Students with Severe Disabilities

The purpose of these activities is to develop a global perspective of the student as an individual, to begin understanding the unique characteristics and contributions of the student, and to begin to be aware of the biases and insights of those who know the student well It is important to be aware that in the past, students with this label have been underserved and under challenged in educational programs. The school psychologist can play an important role in emphasizing the students' strengths and potential by redirecting the team when they become pre-occupied with limitations.

Step I: Preliminary Observations and Conversations

The purpose is to become familiar with the individual, with his or her environments, with how he or she responds to testing, and with how he or she is perceived by others.

- Ask those that work with the student; What puzzles you about this student?
- Keep in mind that one test's results are not conclusive evidence to support any hypothesis.
- Speak with students, parents, teachers, and any specialists that work with the students (e.g., occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech language pathologist, special education teachers, etc.)
- Find a convenient time to sit and talk with the student, while being respectful of their space and comfort zones. Ask questions, comment on what is going on in the environment. Most importantly, take the opportunity to connect with the student and interact with the as a human being. It is not important that they converse with you, but just that you take time to spend with them.
- Connect with siblings as they may have valuable insight to offer.
- Remember that various perspectives are crucial to developing the most appropriate plan, but always listen with an open mind, refraining from forming judgments prior to gaining a global perspective of the student.
- It is important to determine from interviews and interacting with the student information about how they communicate with others. For example; how they answer questions, express themselves, read and write.
- Gather information from many sources and allow comprehensive information to

guide the assessment.

Step II: Intensive Observations

The purpose of these activities is to gather data on how the student responds, adapts, and contributes in typical environments with or without a variety of supports. Observational data is best when it is collected across time rather than in a one-shot observation, but in all cases it is compared and contrasted with the interview data (see below). The psychologist must be interested in and explore evidence of how learning occurs, social and interpersonal relationships, affective factors, and social membership. In all cases these data both tell something about the student and about the levels of support being provided by the environment.

- Be respectful. Have the teacher introduce you as an observer for the whole class. (DO NOT PICK OUT STUDENT). Spend time observing and getting to know a lot of different students, including the one you're there to observe.
- Always observe the student's academic performance, learning, and behavior within the immediate context of both what the other students are doing and what the teacher is doing. For example, the area of concern might be that the student is disruptive and/or Inattentive, but sometimes this may reflect lack of structure in the classroom and that the peers are engaged in similar behaviors.
- Strive to understand the students' functioning in a variety of environments.
- Spend time observing students in different settings, both structured and unstructured (i.e. general education classroom, special education classroom, lunch time, recess time, physical education, art, music, etc.).
- Observe students during different times of the day (to observe patterns of behavior, energy level, fatigue, alertness, etc.).
- Keep in mind that the student's behavior and learning may be a function of the opportunities being provided, the treatment of the student by the providers, and their perceptions of the student's innate abilities, needs, and problems.
- Never look at the student in isolation. It is important for you to observe every student's behavior and productivity so you have a context for understanding.
- Conduct direct observations of students' behavior that will allow you to focus on specific concerns stemming from conversations and observations.
- Offer insight into students' strengths and interests, which will be very useful when developing appropriate recommendations, accommodations/adaptations, and other supports.
- Don't assume that behaviors observed are due to the disability.

Step III: Formal and Informal Interviews

The purpose of these activities is to gather substantial and substantive information on how the student responds, adapts, and contributes across typical environments as perceived by those who know him or her well. The data gathered through these processes is often the most important and most valuable information that will be collected throughout the assessment process. In all cases the information gained from the interview tells us something about the student and about the significant people in the student's life, their expectations, perceptions, and affective investment in the student.

- The psychologist must probe his or her respondents for information on how learning occurs, social and interpersonal relationships, affective factors, and social membership within a variety of typical contexts.
- Special attention should be paid to "natural environments," which are environments that are frequented by people without disabilities.
- It is useful to create a protocol of questions relating to learning, behaviors and relationships that the student has in educational and other environments. Please see *InitialConversations-* http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/psychassessres.php?itemid=450&blogid=111 on the *Resource Page -* http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/psychassessres.php?blogid=111.

Step IV: Records Review

The purpose is to augment and supplement information that has been collected via direct observations, interviews and testing.

- All records should be reviewed with some degree of skepticism.
- The following records should be looked at; past IEP's, behavior intervention plans, past psychological evaluations, evaluations by other professionals and other incidental records.
- Watch out for IEPs and past records in which the goals and objectives never change, or which are focused on self-care, independent living, and/or preschool/developmental skills. Especially in the latter case, this means that this student has had extremely limited opportunities for growth and learning and is likely to appear less capable and more lethargic than the same student in a more integrated environment.

Step V: Developing a Plan For Testing - IF NECESSARY

Once intensive interviews and observations have taken place the next step is to consider what further steps need to be taken. Intensive interviews and observations may comprise

the entire assessment for students with severe disabilities. After all, some of the most valuable information for developing educational plans and goals is likely derived from the preceding steps.

- Utilize information from many the various sources and allow comprehensive information to guide the assessment.
- Students do not always follow the typical 'developmental milestones'; do not assume students can or cannot perform a skill based on the presence or absence of a readiness skill (For example; students cannot name the letters in the alphabet, but may be able to read)
- View students from a strength-based perspective.
- Incorporate the information already gathered and determine how to get the most meaningful information from the tests. (**IF FORMAL TESTING IS EVEN NECESSARY)**
- Determine which measures will be most appropriate for students with low incidence disabilities based on recommendations. (See *Need to Know- http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/NeedtoKnow.php* and *General Guidelines - http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/index.php?itemid=428*).
- Altering standard assessment procedures may be necessary to best evaluate students. Keep in mind that there are many *disadvantages of using standardized instruments* http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/psychassessres.php?itemid=450&blogid=111.
- Use *alternative assessment instruments -* http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/psychassessres.php?itemid=436&blogid=111- as needed .
- Be willing to alter your plan if the initial plan for testing does not elicit accurate or useful information, Always keeping in mind the purpose of an assessment is to develop an appropriate educational plan, not just special education qualification.

Test Selection

- Basals and ceilings can mask language/skill gaps. It may be necessary to test beyond the usual guidelines.
- Include typical school tasks and concept tests in assessment process to supplement results from standardized tests. (See *alternative assessment -* http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/psychassessres.php?itemid=436&blogid=111 on the *Resource Page -* http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/psychassessres.php?blogid=111.)
- Important information may be elicited from a test, but with time restraints, that information may be lost. Time restraints will likely penalize students who are cognitively impaired or have inhibited processing speed, not accounting for their actual strengths and abilities.

<u>Special Materials/Accommodations</u>
- Consider the students' sensory needs. These might include the need for a familiar adult to be present and help interpret, augmentative devices, simplified print or oral presentation of the information, wearing glasses if needed, hearing aids turned on with batteries, and special positing for motor difficulties
- Address adaptive equipment needs ahead of time. For example, seek the help of a physical therapist for special positioning needs or the assistance of a speech and language specialist for special language considerations, slant board for writing, adapted mouse/keyboard, etc.)
- Consider the position in which the student works best (i.e., wheelchair, adaptive chair, prone stander, examiner sitting next to students, etc.)
- Make every attempt not to test the student at a time when they will miss a critical or preferred activity.

<u>Preliminary Preparations</u>
- Make sure vision, hearing, and health reports are up-to-date.
- Be very familiar with testing instruments.
- Double check with the special education teacher and any other professionals working with the students, confirming accommodations that need to be made.
- Understand and prepare for assistive technology needs of the students.
- Schedule adequate time for testing.
- Make sure that the room is set up, all assistive devices are in place and everything is ready.

Step VI: Administer Appropriate Formal Assessment Measures
Consider all accommodations and recommendations specific to the students

<u>Before Testing Preparations</u>
- Explain the process to the student (including where, when and all transitions.)
- Confirm that the room is set up and ready.
- Ask the student how to handle a situation if you are not sure.
- Ask the student if they would like assistance before providing it.
- Respond to the student as an individual; be respectful.
- Don't rush the assessment process. Plan considerably more time for the assessment and provide ample time for rapport-building before beginning   assessment.
- Use students' names first when talking to them.
- Allow them time to orient to the room by exploring and touching objects if they so

desire. You may also verbally describe the room if the student has vision loss.

- Clearly explain the purpose of testing to decrease stress.
- Make sure students have necessary accommodations and personal aids in place. (i.e., augmentative systems, glasses, hearing aids). Do not assess without the devices used by the students in the classroom.

Testing Room
- Control for glare and background noise.
- Use carpeted room with curtains or drapes (if possible).
- Keep doors and windows closed unless air flow is needed for comfort.
- Avoid rooms with noisy air conditioners and heating ducts.
- Clear the room of any visual clutter.
- For students with low vision, maximize usable vision by:
    o Eliminate any flickering lights
    o Provide light sources from the side of the more efficient eye
    o Make sure that the examiner is not backlit; students should not be facing a window or other source of light
    o Always be aware and sensitive to glare issues with all testing materials
- Ask students about any additional needs. This will also provide information on the students' ability to self-advocate.

During Testing
- Speak to the student in accordance with their chronological grade level. Simplify when needed, but don't speak to the student as though they are an infant.
- Be clear in instruction, repeat if necessary and be careful with extraneous wording. Expanded instruction may confuse the situation. Encourage questions from students.
- Monitor that students are using glasses, visual aids or other assistive devices they use in class.
- Describe your activities (recording responses, arranging materials, etc.) to lower students' anxiety.
- Always talk students through transitions.
- Be sensitive to fatigue and nonverbal signs of anxiety and take breaks as needed.
- Keep materials not in use out of sight.

After Testing
- Walk students back to class and talk with them as you walk. This increases student's confidence in the process and decreases apprehension about performance.
- Thank the student for his or her time and let them know you enjoyed spending time

with them.
- Take session notes immediately after testing.
- Record any difficulties, accommodations, and modifications that occurred during testing.
- Be aware that students' performance on performance tasks may be indicative of their inexperience with similar tasks, and may not reflect their actual cognitive ability. Carefully observe and note their behavior and comments throughout.
- Consult with the special education teachers and other specialists when interpreting results.
- Don't assume that the students' performance in the test environment implies a similar level of performance in the classroom.

Step VII: Case Validation

The purpose is to ensure that interpretation of results reflect the rich understandings of those that know the student well. Keep in mind that tests do not diagnose in and of themselves. They serve as indicators and hypothesis generators.
- If any portion of the assessment is beyond your scope of experience it is important to consult with other colleagues and professionals.
- Go over findings with the student you are assessing, and specialists and teachers working with the student.
- Draw upon the expertise and experience of the other professionals who provide services to the students.
- Work collaboratively with those who may know the students better than you do.
- When appropriate, discuss preliminary findings with parents to gain more insight and feedback from their experiences.
- Initial assessment measures may indicate more specific areas of concern.
- Consult with a colleague or refer the students to other professionals for a more detailed evaluation if needed.
- Consider many factors when determining the existence of a learning disability **(do not have this resource for severe disabilities..only VI and DHH).**
- Consider systemic barriers, i.e. lack of appropriate testing materials.
- Follow up on unusual findings in the assessment by referring or by administering additional measures.

Step VII: Report Findings and Plan Collaboratively
- School Psychologists are not finished once the protocols have been scored.
- Interpret findings and communicate them with the interdisciplinary team (including

the students and the parents…see *suggestions for talking with students and parents about assessment results-*
http://nclid.unco.edu/newnclid/psychassessres.php?itemid=432&blogid=111).

- Work collaboratively with team members to identify strengths and concerns that will ultimately contribute to practical educational supports for the students. Simply reporting scores is not helpful.
- Include the teachers (both general and special education) and other specialists working with the students throughout every stage of the assessment process.
- If test scores must be qualified, use ranges of performance rather than single scores. Avoid all use of developmental age scores such as "Susie, who is 14, is functioning at a 6-month-old level."
- Make suggestions for practical classroom solutions based on findings.
- Follow up on your recommendations to evaluate their effectiveness.
- Include the students in the discussion of results and program planning.