

Center for Family Development

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Assessment: The Whys and Whats

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Why is a Comprehensive Assessment Important?

Children who have experienced complex early trauma, maltreatment, institutional care, foster care or multiple placements often have equally complex difficulties. Effectively treating and parenting children with complex histories requires an understanding of what is causing the difficulties. After all, what we want to do is to remedy the underlying cause of the problems. The same symptom profile may have a variety of causes and, of course, it is the underlying causes that we treat, not the surface symptoms. For example, when you go to your physician with a cough, you want to know why you are coughing because it matters whether the cough is caused by allergies, tuberculosis or lung cancer; each of which has a different and effective treatment. Even the best provider delivering the best treatment will produce no improvement if the right cause is not being treated.

Correct diagnosis or assessment is vital; and the assessment should be focused on causes. Too often diagnoses are based on surface symptoms without considering the underlying cause. If I said to you, "I'd like to place an 8-year-old boy in your home who has difficulty in school and at home, often is 'in another world,' gets side tracked and is easily distracted, is forgetful, and often loses gloves, pencils, and books," you might think, "ah, yes, a kid with ADD or ADHD." You might be right. However, that same symptom profile can occur if the child has sensory-integration dysfunction, an anxiety disorder, a traumatic brain injury, prenatal exposure to alcohol or other toxins, early trauma, or a mood disorder; and each of these conditions has a different and effective treatment, but only for that cause. So, providing excellent treatment for ADHD will not remedy attention problems caused by an anxiety disorder or caused by sensory-integration dysfunction.

Anyone who begins treatment without a comprehensive professional assessment is violating an important standard of care. My professional opinion is that any therapist who begins treatment without first conducting a comprehensive assessment is not practicing ethically, professionally, or in a manner consistent with current standards of care. I am frequently called as an expert witness in court cases and malpractice cases where the therapist has provided treatment without an evaluation and

then faced legal problems later because of that oversight. There is no one treatment for all conditions. Accurate diagnosis and assessment of the causes of the difficulties is essential to selecting the proper treatment.

A professional assessment for children with complex histories, that is consistent with the current standard of care, must be comprehensive and address a variety of areas.

What should an evaluation include?

A comprehensive assessment must consider mental health issues, attachment and trauma, sensory-integration, and executive function and neuropsychological issues. In addition, the evaluation should include an assessment of the seven domains that may be affected by Complex Trauma (aka Developmental Trauma Disorder): attachment, behavioral regulation, emotional regulation, cognition, biology, defensive functions and self-concept as well as possible prenatal exposure to toxins. The evaluation should include a review of all records such as previous evaluations, school records, adoption summaries, placement histories and other similar records. In addition, information should be gathered from the family, the child, and other sources such as the school. This is important since it can help differentiate whether the symptom is more emotional and psychological in nature or grounded in neuropsychological or brain functioning. The above table outlines the main domains that an assessment should cover and some methods to do that.

As a consumer you should expect to receive an appropriate evaluation that is comprehensive and which specifies relevant and detailed treatment recommendations. Such recommendations will specify domains that warrant further evaluation by a specialist. For example, the Sensory Profile may suggest that an evaluation by an occupation therapist who is trained in sensory-integration may be necessary. Or, the BRIEF profile on the parent and teacher versions may suggest that the deficits in executive function are more neurologically based than emotional and so a thorough neuropsychological evaluation is indicated. The recommendations should be specific regarding the type of psychotherapy needed and the basis for this recommended treatment. An attachment-focused treatment, which is a relationship-based, family-focused treatment may be indicated along with other interventions. In all instances it is essential that the provider of these treatment and interventions have relevant experience, training, licensing and certification in the recommended treatment.

Since there are different treatments for different conditions, it violates an important standard-of-care if treatment is started before and without first conducting a thorough evaluation. The assessment and recommendations based on the evaluation must then be discussed with the parents. Unless the family understands and agrees with the assessment, the treatment plan will not make sense and it is likely that the treatment will be ineffective. Successful treatment usually requires the active involvement and engagement of the parents. You have a right and a responsibility to be fully informed regarding the professional assessment and the treatment recommended. All your questions and concerns should be addressed before any treatment begins and the professional should welcome your questions as an opportunity to further explain how the assessment relates to the recommendations and as an indication of your involvement and concern.