



Academy of
Orton-Gillingham
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The Informal Assessment

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There are a number of reasons for conducting an informal evaluation. For instance, in the case of a young child who is having problems with reading and writing in first or second grade, parents may have concerns. They may worry because an older sibling has been diagnosed as dyslexic, or feel that dyslexia runs in the family. They may not be able to afford the two or three thousand dollars required for a full-scale evaluation. They may distrust the reassurances of school personnel that direct them not to worry, that the child will catch on soon-or, worse, that the child is working up to capacity and that no more can be expected.

In other instances, the child or student may have had a very full battery of tests, but the report fails to give a comprehensive picture of the child. The very best psychological testing, such as that conducted by the late Dr. Karl Kline and his wife, Carolyn, and, until recently, by Roger Saunders in Baltimore, or by Phoebe Liss in Middletown, N.Y, do indeed produce a sensitive portrait of the child. Innumerable tests, complete with percentiles and standard scores may not tell parents what they want to know. Too often the recommendations are computer generated, e.g. In one instance, for a first grader, the recommendation was for untimed SAT's. Vision therapy, tinted lenses, diet changes, or other controversial therapies may be recommended, in lieu of the Orton-Gillingham tutoring which is what the child really needs. Thus, effective treatment may be delayed, family resources frittered away, and valuable time wasted as the child's self-esteem plummets.

Even though dyslexia is the most common cause of school failure, affecting up to 20% of all students, many systems avoid the use of the word, preferring to skirt around the problem with terms such as "auditory processing problems," "difficulty with auditory discrimination," "visual imaging problems," and "fine motor muscle difficulty." Attentional difficulties or emotional factors may be blamed for the child's failure to learn.

Some psychologists insist that they do not want to "label" the child. Yet, children who are not told about dyslexia generally come to a conclusion of their own: "I am just stupid." Often I see parents and children in my home, as it is a more relaxed situation than my office. Sometimes I light a fire, and we sit around in the living room. In summer, we sometimes start out on the porch. The first thing I want to do is to assess oral language. After the usual preliminary greetings, I work to engage the child in conversation. I have a number of open-ended questions that I adapt to fit the situation, with a view to getting the child to talk as much as possible. For instance, for a young child, I might ask, "Do you have any pets in the house," and then get them to tell me about them. If not, I ask what they would like to have for a pet. "Who looks after the pets?" "Is there anything you do around the house to help?" "Who makes your bed?" "Do you know how to do laundry?" "Can you cook anything?" "Do you have a yard or a garden?" "Do you rake leaves or shovel snow?" "What did you go last summer?" "Have you ever spent time away from home." and, if so,

“tell me about it.” “Do you see any of your grandparents? “Where do they live?” “What is the farthest you have ever been from home?” “What do you like to do outdoors?” “Can you swim?” “How did you learn?” “What do you like to do on a rainy day?” “Tell me about a movie you enjoyed.” “Tell me something you are good at.” “Do you like school?” If so, “Why?” and if not, “Why?” “What is your favorite subject at school?”

As the child talks, I listen to a sentence structure, am alert to word-finding difficulties, and to time sequencing. I also note whether a young child responds to me directly, or turns to a parent for reassurance. With older students, I may begin asking about work experience and then lead on into a discussion of how they got the job, what it involved, what they were paid, and what they did with money. I ask about sports, and perhaps, travel experience and eventually about school.

Then I move into the kitchen or dining room and begin testing. If a young child is happier with a parent present, that is never a problem for me. Usually, I begin by asking the child to draw something. Often I ask for a person, and then suggest they put anything else they like into the picture. As they work, I watch pencil grip and arm and wrist posture. I notice how they begin...often it is with the feet and they draw upwards. I note how they make a circle for the face, clockwise or anti-clockwise. When they finish, I ask that they put their name on the picture – again noting letter formation.

Next, if appropriate, I might explore phonemic awareness. “Do these words rhyme” I might do a couple of exercises in deletion, e.g., “Say snow. Now say it but don’t say /s/.” “Say silk. Now say it but don’t say /k/.” Or syllable deletion, e.g., “Say tadpole. Now say it but don’t say tad. Say dentist. Say it again but don’t say tist.” If I wonder about sequencing, I write the date on my notes, hesitating: “Well, let’s see...now yesterday was (pause to see if child replies) Wednesday, so I guess today must be (pause again) Thursday.” Sometimes I manage to do the same with the month. With an older child, I might ask, “Any idea how many days there are in the month?”

Then I flip through part of the card deck. With a young child, I may do it twice, the first time asking for letter names, and a second time for sounds. I am alert to reversals...students of any age may confuse *b* and *d*, a young child may read *qu* as *up*, read *l* as a numeral, hesitate over *j* – “my teacher didn’t do that one yet.” Vowel sounds are often a problem. With older students, I may include digraphs and some of the vowel teams.

Then I ask the students to write a lower-case alphabet. In the case of older students, I suggest cursive, but do not insist. I keep an eye on the time... how long does it take. Can they sequence independently, or do they have to rely on my naming the letters for them. How are the letters formed? In the case of print, no letter begins on the line, but children who have been badly taught begin most letters from the bottom up. I note other malformations, watching carefully so as not to miss anything. What about reversals? In the case of cursive writing, I again watch formations of individual letters carefully...even older students often get into trouble at the end of the alphabet. If the lower-case letters are fluent, I may ask for capitals.

I am not in search for standardized scores – these are unusually available elsewhere. The IOTA, devised by Monroe in her book, *Children who Cannot Read*, was based on words Dr. Orton found children often mispronounced or reversed. I hand the child one card at a time, asking him or her to read the words going down each column. The first three words, “dog, dig, dug,” test the ability of the child to change the vowel sound. Of course, some will immediately read the sequence as “bog, big, bug.” This is followed by a column of commonly reversed or confused words: on, saw, of, for, who, and how. The next column tests the ability of the student to change the initial consonant. The second card of the test is the most difficult and includes

such words as blind and bond, mare, fare, and care, longer words such as request and tarnish, as well as some words that are readily reversed, such as tar, nip, and ton. The last card includes readily reversed words – left often read as felt, balk often read as black, and plea, which can emerge as please, leap, or peal.

Dr. Orton was always interested in and concerned with the phenomenon of reversals. While their significance is often derided by modern researchers, those of us who have been in the field for a long time pay attention to them. Dyslexic students are prone to reversals in speech, in reading, in handwriting, in spelling, and in mathematics. The norms on the IOTA are out of-date and inaccurate, but that is not the point of this valuable test.

Another useful test of decoding is the Gallistel-Ellis, devised by Dr. Gallistel and Dr. Ellis, two distinguished professors. This test consists of lists of words to be read across, and each list explores a different aspect of decoding. The first couple of lines consist of familiar words that a student may recognize by sight. There follow less familiar words, and the last line of each section consists of detached syllables; thus, the ability of the student to blend sounds is explored. I type each list onto a separate card, rather than handing the child the entire booklet. Since, I am not concerned with norms, I can go as far as I deem necessary in each section. Handling a child just one card at a time makes the task seem more manageable. The test progresses from three letter closed syllables, goes on through blends and digraphs, silent-e, vowel teams, and R-controlled vowels before proceeding to multisyllabic words. The last section of the test, which I always administer, consists of common sight words. Some students, sight readers, read the last section rapidly and accurately, even though they may have great difficulty with the earlier sections that involve a knowledge of vowels and common digraphs.

At this point I administer a spelling test. Generally, I use the Morrison McCall as it comes in eight forms and the norms, though out-of-date, are pretty reliable. I watch the child write, note any changes or erasures, and stop as soon as the child seems frustrated.

I test oral reading with the original Gray Oral Reading Paragraphs that begin, “A boy had a dog,” and end with, “The hypotheses concerning physical phenomena formulated by the early philosophers...” Sometimes, rather than produce a stopwatch, I rely on the second hand of my watch so that the child is not aware of being time. Since I have used this test for many years, I have memorized the paragraphs, and can give full attention to noting the exact nature of every error. Again, the norms are out-of-date, but actually correlate pretty well with the latest version of the test. I generally do not test silent-reading skills, as these test results are usually available, and in the case of children who have decoding problems, unreliable.

Finally, I ask the child to write a paragraph on a subject that, from my previous conversations appears to be suitable, judging by what I have learned about the child’s knowledge and interests.

At this point I am ready to discuss my finding with the parents. I have a set of interesting blocks that will occupy a young child. Alternatively, one parent may wish to take the student out for a walk or to a nearby restaurant for a snack while I talk to the other parent. If they need a written report, I can supply that. I never part with the family without saying something to the child about his strengths, e.g., “You are a pretty good reader,” “Your handwriting is really neat,” or “You wrote an interesting paragraph,” and always end by saying, “Thank you for working so hard for such a long time.” Actually, everything has usually been completed in about an hour and a half.

Sometimes it is evident that there are problems other than dyslexia that I am not competent to diagnose. If I sense that further testing is needed, I refer the parents elsewhere, or at least suggest what kind of further expertise may be required.

Finally, since as Margaret Rawson used to say, “Diagnosis without remediation is cruelty,” I work with the family to make an educational plan. In the process I take into account available financial resources and potential services – such as tutors, summer programs, and schools – as well as the wishes of family members. Sometimes it becomes evident that parents need more information about dyslexia and its implications and appreciate the information our Academy can supply.

Comments from Jean Foss, Founding Fellow/AOGPE

In her article on informal assessment, Diana King has shared with us thinking and insights gained through her years of training, experience and dedicated work with innumerable students of all ages. Diana has managed to describe both the tone and manner that help us to elicit the most useful, authentic information about a child, and the content and skills that are essential if we are to develop an accurate picture of that learner.

There are several points raised through this article that I want to emphasize. Diana King is recognized widely and respected highly as an expert with many years of professional experience in this field. She describes a comprehensive process that yields valuable diagnostic information about a learner and can be used to design and shape focused and effective language instruction. Diana has NOT given us a recipe. The evaluator using a process such as Diana describes must have a high level of competence and much experience in this field in order to gain and apply the insights that are essential for interpreting the information in the most productive way. Within the context of Academy standards, one should be qualified, at the least, as a Certified member of the Academy.

Diana made a comment in passing that I want to highlight as a most crucial factor in informal assessment – in an initial assessment procedure, and in ongoing, daily assessment as one works with a student, “...give full attention to noting the exact nature of every error.” Every error has potential for being the “tip of an iceberg,” the “needle” which may really define the nature of the haystack. It is imperative to note these, and to continuously reflect upon possible patterns and implications as the evidence mounts. For example, many tend to minimize the significance of discrete errors involving sequencing - such as ordering the letters of the alphabet, the days of the week, months of the year, seasons, ordinal numbers, and confusion or omission of suffixes that serve to indicate verb tense. For the dyslexic person, many of these may be persistent problems; it is important to note and address them.

With the above comments, I encourage the reader to give careful attention and reflection when reading Diana’s article. She has given us a wealth of information and described a very powerful tool.