

## ***A Quick Guide for Physicians Regarding:***

- **Requesting school testing for Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)**
- **Ruling out learning disabilities for children who potentially have ADHD**
- **Observing children who potentially have ADHD during office visits**

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### ***Requesting School Testing for ADHD***

School psychologists are commonly asked to do “testing” for ADHD. Contrary to what was thought years ago, there is no reliable set of *test* results that can be used to either confirm or rule out ADHD. Rather, ADHD is evaluated using direct observation, interviews with teachers and parents, and rating scales from home and school. Consider the comment from the DSM-5, the manual used to diagnose ADHD:

“ . . . individuals with ADHD may exhibit cognitive problems on tests of attention, executive function, or memory, although these tests are not sufficiently sensitive or specific to serve as diagnostic indices” (APA, 2013, p. 61).

Also consider comments from various reviews of research:

“Several assessment techniques typically employed by school psychologists have limited utility in the diagnostic evaluation of ADHD. Typically, the results of cognitive, neuropsychological, and educational tests are not helpful in determining whether a child has ADHD or not. To date, no individually administered test or group of tests has demonstrated an acceptable degree of ecological validity to be helpful in the diagnostic process” (DuPaul & Stoner, 2003, p. 29).

“To date, these tests [i.e., IQ tests] have not been shown to be of value in detecting ADHD characteristics specifically, or in accurately classifying cases of this disorder relative to no disorder or to other psychiatric disorders. In other words, no subtest or configuration of subtests is sensitive or specific to ADHD” (Barkley, 2006).

“Admittedly, there is not an objective, conclusive “test” for the disorder, but nor is there an objective test for the common cold. Like the common cold, a diagnosis of ADHD is based on the presence of symptoms.” (Weyandt, 2001, p. 2).

### ***Ruling Out Learning Disabilities for Children who Potentially have ADHD***

A common reason why physicians request school-based testing for a student who may have ADHD is to rule out a learning disability. However, this assumes that the presence or absence of a specific learning disability (SLD) would have direct, diagnostic implications for determining the presence or absence of ADHD. This assumption is questionable. A student can have ADHD without an SLD, an SLD without ADHD, or both concurrently. Thus, the presence or absence of an SLD has no direct bearing on a diagnosis of ADHD.

It is true that students with SLD and otherwise good attention may display symptoms of ADHD, particularly inattentiveness, when they are involved in academic tasks that they find difficult. Students with Speech or Language Impairment (SLI) also may “zone out” when they do not understand material due to their below average language comprehension skills. However, ADHD requires that the symptoms cut across multiple contexts and are not simply found in the learning environment. In their section on “Differential Diagnosis” (the section used to help clinicians distinguish ADHD from conditions that may produce similar symptoms) the DSM-5 says:

“Children with specific learning disorder may appear inattentive because of frustration, lack of interest, or limited ability. However, inattention in individuals with a specific learning disorder who do not have ADHD is not impairing outside of academic work” (p. 64).

