Children's Mental Health: Screening & Evaluation Services

Caregivers, you know the child best! If you are concerned about the child's mental health or behavior, don't hesitate to ask about a screening or evaluation. Early identification is key!

Autism screening & diagnosis

Screening [1, 2]

The first step in identifying autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in children is screening. The screening involves several questionnaires and assessments (tests). The child, the caregiver, and the health professional(s) do these questionnaires and assessments together. The screening cannot diagnose ASD. However, can help figure out if a more comprehensive evaluation is needed.

Diagnosis [3]

To diagnose ASD, healthcare providers will use the DSM-5. This is a guide provided by the American Psychiatric Association. To meet the criteria for an ASD diagnosis, a child must have ongoing difficulties in all areas of social communication and interaction. A child must also show at least two types of repetitive behaviors or strong preferences for routines or specific interests. To learn more about the diagnosis process, visit this Autism Speaks webpage.

Note: ALL children should be screened for ASD at ages 18 and 24 months by their primary care provider. [4]

Comprehensive mental health evaluation [5]

A comprehensive mental health evaluation helps families and healthcare providers better understand a child's:

- Behaviors
- Development
- Emotions
- Everyday challenges

During the evaluation, the provider may talk with the child and family about concerns at home, school, and in other areas of the child's life. They may also ask about the child's medical history, family history, and development. Depending on the child's needs, the evaluation may also include:

- Learning assessments
- Medical evaluations
- Psychological testing
- Speech and language assessments

The goal is to understand the child's strengths and needs. This helps the family determine what support or services may be most helpful.

Note: This is also called a comprehensive psychiatric evaluation.

Developmental screening [6]

Developmental screening is a check that uses questionnaires or checklists to look more closely at a child's development. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends developmental screening at 9, 18, and 30 months. Parents and caregivers can track their child's development by watching for developmental milestones. They can also talk with their child's healthcare provider about any concerns. The CDC offers free milestone checklists by age. These checklists can help families know what skills to look for as their child grows from 2 months through 5 years. If you or your child's healthcare provider has concerns about your child's development, a screening can help figure out what support your child may need.

The checklists are available here.

Neuropsychological screening [7]

A neuropsychological screening is a series of tests that check how a child's brain works.

The tests may look at the following areas:

- Ability to use language and understand what others say
- Attention and concentration
- Executive functions such as organizing and planning, time management, problem solving, and self-control
- Fine motor skills
- General intellect
- How quickly the child can receive, understand, and respond to information (processing speed)
- Learning and memory
- Mood and personality
- Reading and reading comprehension
- Reasoning
- Visuospatial skills (ability to understand the relationships between objects and space)

These tests can help healthcare providers determine a diagnosis and identify strengths and weaknesses in the child's thinking processes. They can also help develop plans for future treatment and interventions.

If you have questions about your child's development or mental/behavioral health, contact your primary care provider or the Well Badger Resource Center.

Sources:

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