



# NASSET Assessment in Special Education Series

## Introduction to Assessment and Overview

An assessment in special education is the process used to determine a child’s specific learning strengths and needs, and to determine whether or not a child is eligible for special education services. Assessment in special education is a process that involves collecting information about a student for the purpose of making decisions. Assessment, also known as evaluation, can be seen as a problem-solving process (Swanson & Watson, 1989) that involves many ways of collecting information about the student. According to Gearheart and Gearheart (1990; cited in Pierangelo and Giuliani, 2006), assessment is “a process that involves the systematic collection and interpretation of a wide variety of information on which to base instructional/intervention decisions and, when appropriate, classification and placement decisions. Assessment is primarily a problem-solving process”.

## Importance of Assessment

The importance of assessment should never be underestimated. In special education, you will work with many professionals from different fields. You are part of a team, often referred to as a multidisciplinary team, that tries to determine what, if any, disability is present in a student. The team’s role is crucial because it helps determine the extent and direction of a child’s personal journey through the special education experience (Pierangelo and Giuliani, 2006). Consequently, the skills you must possess in order to offer a child the most global, accurate, and practical evaluation should be fully understood. The development of these skills should include a good working knowledge of the following components of the assessment process in order to determine the presence of a suspected disability:

- **Collection:** The process of tracing and gathering information from the many sources of background information on a child such as school records, observation, parent intakes, and teacher reports
- **Analysis:** The processing and understanding of patterns in a child’s educational, social, developmental, environmental, medical, and emotional history
- **Evaluation:** The evaluation of a child’s academic, intellectual, psychological, emotional, perceptual, language, cognitive, and medical development in order to determine areas of strength and weakness
- **Determination:** The determination of the presence of a suspected disability and the knowledge of the criteria that constitute each category
- **Recommendation:** The recommendations concerning educational placement and program that need to be made to the school, teachers, and parents

## Purpose of Assessment

Assessment in educational settings serves five primary purposes:

- **screening and identification:** to screen children and identify those who may be experiencing delays or learning problems
- **eligibility and diagnosis:** to determine whether a child has a disability and is eligible for special education services, and to diagnose the specific nature of the student's problems or disability
- **IEP development and placement:** to provide detailed information so that an Individualized Education Program (IEP) may be developed and appropriate decisions may be made about the child's educational placement
- **instructional planning:** to develop and plan instruction appropriate to the child's special needs
- **evaluation:** to evaluate student progress. (Pierangelo and Giuliani, 2006)

## The Difference Between Testing and Assessment

There is sometimes confusion regarding the terms "assessment" and "testing." While they are related, they are not synonymous. Testing is the administration of specifically designed and often standardized educational and psychological measures of behavior and is a part of the assessment process. Testing is just one piece of the assessment process. Assessment encompasses many different methods of evaluation, one of which is using tests.

## Role of the Education Professional in the Special Education Process

The professional involved in special education in today's schools plays a very critical role in the overall education of students with all types of disabilities. The special educator's position is unique in that he or she can play many different roles in the educational environment. Whatever their role, special educators encounter a variety of situations that require practical decisions and relevant suggestions. No matter which type of professional you become in the field of special education, it is always necessary to fully understand the assessment process and to be able to clearly communicate vital information to professionals, parents, and students (Pierangelo and Giuliani, 2006).

## Assessment and Federal Law

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Public Law 105-476, lists 13 separate categories of disabilities under which children may be eligible for special education and related services. These are:

- **autism:** a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3
- **deafness:** a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information, with or without amplification
- **deaf-blindness:** simultaneous hearing and visual impairments
- **hearing impairment:** an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating
- **mental retardation:** significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior

- **multiple disabilities:** the manifestation of two or more disabilities (such as mental retardation-blindness), the combination of which requires special accommodation for maximal learning
- **orthopedic impairment:** physical disabilities, including congenital impairments, impairments caused by disease, and impairments from other causes
- **other health impairment:** having limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems
- **serious emotional disturbance:** a disability where a child of typical intelligence has difficulty, over time and to a marked degree, building satisfactory interpersonal relationships; responds inappropriately behaviorally or emotionally under normal circumstances; demonstrates a pervasive mood of unhappiness; or has a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears
- **specific learning disability:** a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations
- **speech or language impairment:** a communication disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment
- **traumatic brain injury:** an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both
- **visual impairment:** a visual difficulty (including blindness) that, even with correction, adversely affects a child educational performance

## Conclusion

To determine if a child is eligible for classification under one of the 13 areas of exceptionality, an individualized evaluation, or assessment, of the child must be conducted. The focus of this series is to take you, the educator, step-by-step through the assessment process in special education. The following is a list of the latest and upcoming issues of this series.