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Beyond Standardized Tests: Informal Assessment Tips and Resources for the Speech-Language Pathologist

So, you are the Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) on your school's assessment team, and you have been assigned to participate in an assessment of a student for whom eligibility under the category of Autism is being considered. Or maybe your student has previously been found eligible for services under Autism, but your team has decided to reevaluate to consider information for an IEP and/or a behavior support plan.

In the first scenario, you have two jobs. Does the student qualify for eligibility under Autism and what information needs to be gathered to develop the IEP and possible Behavior Support Plan? In the second scenario, your team may have reviewed data and determined the eligibility category remains appropriate, but you need information for IEP development.

If you are new to Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or would like to review an overview of ASD from the SLP perspective, we suggest you consider the information provided by the American Speech, Language and Hearing Association (ASHA) The link is: <https://www.asha.org/Practice-Portal/Clinical-Topics/Autism> The following is quoted from ASHA's document.

Regardless of the presence or absence of difficulties acquiring the form and content of language, all individuals with ASD are eligible for speech-language services due to the pervasive nature of the social communication impairment. Therefore, SLPs need to advocate for inclusion of language intervention for individuals diagnosed with ASD and ensure that individuals with ASD also receive a diagnosis of language disorder (LD), when they meet the criteria.

In Missouri public schools, we do not diagnose. We determine eligibility, and it would not be necessary to determine eligibility in both categories listed above. However, it is appropriate to provide speech and language services for any of our students receiving eligibility under Autism.

Further, here's what ASHA says about what we want for our students with ASD.

- *Initiating spontaneous communication in functional activities.*
- *Engaging in reciprocal communication interactions*
- *Generalizing skills across activities, environments, and communication partners.*

As you read the above and think about goals, you might be wondering whether information from standardized tests will support these real-life targets. Of course, there is a place for standardized measures, and they should be included in your assessment plan. The ASHA practice portal mentioned above will give you a list of appropriate instruments. However, you can't rely on numbers alone. What are some assessment strategies that will give you information on which to build goals that serve individuals with ASD in their everyday environments?

First, observation is key. Not only do two of the most widely used instruments to determine the presence of autism use structured observations and interview (Autism Diagnostic Observation System or ADOS and Autism Diagnostic Interview or ADI-R), informal observation in multiple settings and by multiple observers is appropriate. In Missouri, we look for evidence of the following.

- Disturbances of speech, language-cognitive and non-verbal communication
- Disturbances of the capacity to relate appropriately to people, objects, and events.

We also look for evidence in the following associated areas.

- Disturbances of developmental rates and sequences.
- Disturbances of responses to sensory stimuli.

More information regarding assessment for Autism is available at Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website at: <https://dese.mo.gov/special-education/effective-practices/disability-resources/autism>

Nowhere on DESE's information is standardized testing required. It is appropriate, but not sufficient. Again, thorough observation is key. ASHA's three points regarding what we want for our students with autism listed above are geared toward social communication in real settings. It is difficult to gain that information from standardized instruments. Following is a list provided by ASHA for consideration under Social Communication.

- use of gaze;
- joint attention;

- sharing affect;
- initiation of communication;
- social reciprocity and the range of communicative functions;
- play behaviors;
- understanding and use of facial expressions;
- use of gestures;
- speech prosody (using stress and intonation to effectively convey meaning);
and
- conversational skills, including
 - topic management (initiating, maintaining, and terminating relevant, shared topics);
 - turn-taking; and
 - providing appropriate amounts of information in conversational contexts.

These points may provide you with a guide for observation and will be important in your determination of eligibility and, more importantly, in the creation of IEP goals.

Speech Pathologists often complete a language sample when completing assessments. With a focus on grammatical markers and length of utterance, the language sample should also include information on the social communication points above.

Additionally, here are some suggestions for non-standardized instruments that will help you gain the information you need to meet DESE's criteria for eligibility under autism.

Autism Social Skills Profile by Dr. Scott Bellini

https://www.ocali.org/up_doc/Autism_Social_Skills_Profile.pdf

Underlying Characteristics Checklists from the Ziggurat Group by Ruth Aspy and Barry Grossman <https://texasautism.com/blog/aboutbook/ucc/> (These may be difficult to access, but the website indicates orders may be obtained by emailing. Apparently, the website is being updated for online ordering.)

The book Thinking About You, Thinking About Me by Michelle Garcia Winner includes the Social Thinking Dynamic Assessment Protocol. Social Thinking materials may be accessed at: <https://www.socialthinking.com>.

Another resource you may want to review is included in the the Autism Speaks website: <https://www.autismspeaks.org/science-blog/speech-language-pathologists->

[and-autism-learn-how-we-can-help](#). This might be helpful as you explain your scope of work to administrators, team members and families.

As an SLP, your assessment for students being considered for eligibility of services under autism and for creation of IEP goals includes more than standardized tests for language, and speech production. Hopefully the suggestions above will widen your scope when planning assessment.

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