IQ Testing 101: Information Every Parent Wants to Know

Hearing the phrase, “Your child will be given an IQ test” can be anxiety provoking. As a parent you may feel concerned about what the experience will be like for your child, how to best prepare your child, and what the results will mean for your child’s future. You may wonder why your child has to take an IQ test and what type of information will be gathered during the testing. You may also have questions about your role and how you can support your child throughout the process. The goal of this article is to address some of these questions and concerns by providing parents with accurate and helpful information about IQ tests, including reasons for administration and procedures to read and truly understand your child’s psychological report.

What is an IQ test?
- IQ stands for “Intelligence Quotient” and is a very general measure of learning potential that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, and comprehend complex ideas.
- IQ tests do not measure academic skills or test-taking smarts.
- IQ tests are standardized assessments. They contain a uniform set of instructions and yield information about a particular child’s performance in relation to a national sample of same age peers.
- Typically, IQ tests examine four general areas of functioning:

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<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Verbal Comprehension</td>
<td>The ability to understand and use words to analyze, comprehend, and solve language-based problems.</td>
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<td>Nonverbal Reasoning</td>
<td>The ability to analyze information and solve problems using visual, spatial, or hands-on reasoning.</td>
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<td>Working Memory</td>
<td>The ability to store and manipulate information for a short span of time.</td>
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<td>Processing Speed</td>
<td>The level of mental quickness and task performance with focused concentration and attention.</td>
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Pros and Cons
As an evaluative tool, there are both benefits and limitations to IQ testing. It is important to take into account both the benefits and limitations of IQ tests in order to understand what they mean for your child and you. The
following is a brief table highlighting some key factors to consider:

<table>
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<th>Benefits of an IQ Test</th>
<th>Limitations of an IQ Test</th>
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<td>An IQ test can help a psychologist make recommendations about instructional planning based on a student’s profile of strengths and weaknesses.</td>
<td>IQ tests only provide estimates of intellectual ability.</td>
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<td>The IQ score can be used to determine how to help the child learn based on his or her unique learning profile.</td>
<td>The results cannot provide information about the origin of a certain difficulty in your child.</td>
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<td>It is generally agreed upon that IQ tests measure certain skills that are important to school learning, and that IQ scores are highly correlated to school achievement. In that regard, IQ tests can be viewed as predictors of school achievement.</td>
<td>IQ tests are not designed to measure things like social skills, creativity, motivation, self-esteem, or family environment - all factors that may be important to your child’s achievement.</td>
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Typically, IQ scores viewed in isolation offer very limited information and are most helpful when used as a reference point with which to understand a child’s learning profile. Therefore, it is often recommended that information from the child’s medical history, educational history, behavior, and social/emotional development be taken into consideration as well as further standardized assessment of processing skills.

**Why does my child need an IQ test?**

- Your child may be required to take an IQ test for independent school admissions and placement.
- You may be interested in receiving a comprehensive evaluation, which includes an IQ test, to learn about your child’s learning strengths and weaknesses and to assist in educational planning.
- In public schools, intelligence tests are used as part of psycho-educational evaluations to help determine eligibility for special education services.

**What happens during the test?**

- The tests are administered by a psychologist in a one-on-one environment.
- The administration typically takes from one to two hours and involves brief interesting activities.
- Tasks may include answering questions, using manipulatives such as blocks, or participating in timed activities.
- The psychologist hopes to make the experience enjoyable for the child and includes breaks and offers encouragement as needed.
- The testing environment allows the examiner to obtain a representation of the child’s ability as well as his or her approach to various tasks.

**How can I prepare my child for testing?**

Unlike tests in school that measure factual knowledge or academic skills, your child cannot study for an IQ test. An IQ test is designed to examine the cognitive abilities of an individual by evaluating how he or she performs on novel tasks.
While many children are comfortable in a testing situation, some children may feel worried about taking tests in an unfamiliar setting. If your child expresses worry, it may be helpful to emphasize the importance of trying his or her best and de-emphasize factors like getting a good score, showing the clinician that you are smart, or gaining admissions into a school of choice. Children can also practice relaxation strategies, like deep breathing, prior to and during testing (i.e., drop your head, close your eyes, and take three deep breaths). This can be practiced at home and may be useful for other school-based tests as well.

Other helpful ideas include:
- Make sure your child gets a good night’s rest before the test and has a healthy meal before the testing session.
- You may wish to pack a snack from home for your child to enjoy during testing breaks, but often the clinician will provide snacks as well.
- Plan ahead so that you have enough time to arrive at the testing location without rushing so that you and your child feel relaxed on testing day.
- It is helpful to talk briefly with your child about the testing to explain what the experience will be like. Saying something like this may be helpful:

  “You will be seeing someone who gets to meet with lots of children to find out about how they learn. This person will ask you to do several different activities, like building with blocks or looking at pictures and answering questions. You will be with this person for about one to two hours and I will be waiting for you when you are done. Some of the activities will be easy and some may be kind of hard, but it is your job to try your best.” The psychologist who your child meets with will also explain the process prior to testing.

**What does an IQ score mean?**
The spread of people along the IQ continuum, from low to high, can be represented well by the bell curve (see figure below). Most people cluster around the middle or average range (IQ score of 85-115) with a small percentage falling above or below this range and an even smaller percentage falling well below or above average. In other words, the vast majority of people have IQ’s within the average range, with a small minority of individuals falling outside of this range.

![IQ Score Distribution](image)

**Summary**
Ultimately, an intelligence test can be a helpful tool when a child is struggling in school and parents and teachers are seeking further information to guide educational planning. IQ scores are considered relatively stable and
become more stable as a child gets older, which means that your child’s score is unlikely to change significantly over time.

It is important to remember that your child’s IQ score is only one piece of the puzzle and is not the only factor that determines future academic success or failure. A child with a very high IQ who is uninterested in learning or gives up easily may not achieve as much as a child with an average IQ who is motivated and perseveres when faced with challenges. Therefore, while an IQ test can yield reliable and helpful information, it only reveals part of the picture. In order to understand the child as a whole, a comprehensive evaluation that incorporates multiple sources of information (e.g., formal and informal assessments of academic achievement, parent, teacher, and student reports, student work products, classroom observation) may be recommended.