



The challenges of assessing cognitive function in children

It is a great responsibility to set a psychological diagnosis. You want it to be correct, both to enable the individual to get the right help but also to feel confident before communicating what is often a tough message for the individual and their family to receive. However, assessing a child's cognitive functioning and making a diagnosis is not always an easy task. In this paper you will be able to read about some common challenges in cognitive evaluations of children and suggestions about recent publications that may support the clinical work.

Differentiating between diagnoses

One challenge is to differentiate between different diagnoses. It is not uncommon for children to exhibit behaviours typical of several different conditions. One condition that sometimes is confused with [autism](#), [ADHD](#) and intellectual disability is cerebral visual impairment (CVI). It is a form of visual impairment that influences visual perception but where the function of the eyes is intact. Vision is of critical importance for our cognitive functions as well as social and adaptive skills. A visual impairment, such as CVI, increases the likelihood of developmental delays and of developing behaviours that resemble a neurodevelopmental condition. This is just one example of when differentiating



between diagnoses may be challenging. For anyone interested in further reading on this topic, a comprehensive review was published in 2021 by Chokron and colleagues (please see the reference list for details).

Assessing non-native speakers



As society is becoming more and more multicultural, another challenge is assessing children with a different mother tongue and cultural background. In such cases the usual standardised measures may not be suitable to use, since they are based on norms gathered in the British population and include many language-dependent subtests. This may result in the psychologist being dependent on an interpreter during the assessment, choose nonverbal assessments, or use available

assessments in the child's mother tongue (unless the language is not a barrier for interpretation of the results). In other words, it requires the psychologists to be creative, gather information from several different sources and to a larger extent rely on their clinical judgement.

While assessing non-native speakers remain a challenge, a piece of work that may assist psychologists in their work is a paper by Tassé and colleagues that was published in 2019. In collaboration with an interdisciplinary panel of experts, they developed a comprehensive list of behavioural indicators for the classification of intellectual disability in ICD-11. The purpose was to provide psychologists with an alternative guide to use in determining the presence of a diagnosis and the severity level. These guidelines may be helpful when assessing a non-native speaker but also when a child's IQ score is just above or below 70, and bordering an intellectual disability.

Ruling out environmental influences

Another challenge for psychologists is to be able to exclude other factors that may explain a child's behaviours and cognitive functioning. It may be important life events, family conditions, school situation, medical history, substance use and many other factors. In society today it may be relevant to consider children's and adolescents' screen habits. A recent systematic review showed that excessive screen time may increase the presence of attentional problems (Santos et al., 2022). Other studies have observed an association between daily screen exposure and the presence of autistic-like behaviours in children, in particular when the initial age of screen exposure was 3 years or younger (Chen et al., 2021).



Conclusion



To sum up, psychologists face several different challenges when assessing cognitive function in children and adolescents. Some of these challenges include differentiating between different diagnoses, evaluating non-native speakers, and considering the influence from environmental factors on the individual's cognitive functioning. Recent research may help bring perspectives to these challenges and provide clinical guidance.

→ **DISCOVER RELATED ARTICLES
AND INFORMATION HERE**

References

Chen, J. Y., Strodl, E., Wu, C. A., Huang, L. H., Yin, X. N., Wen, G. M., ... & Chen, W. Q. (2021). Screen time and autistic-like behaviors among preschool children in China. *Psychology, health & medicine*, 26(5), 607-620.

Chokron, S., Kovarski, K., Zalla, T., & Dutton, G. N. (2020). The inter-relationships between cerebral visual impairment, autism and intellectual disability. *Neuroscience & biobehavioral reviews*, 114, 201-210.

Santos, R. M. S., Mendes, C. G., Marques Miranda, D., & Romano-Silva, M. A. (2022). The association between screen time and attention in children: a systematic review. *Developmental neuropsychology*, 47(4), 175-192.

Tassé, M. J., Balboni, G., Navas, P., Luckasson, R., Nygren, M. A., Belacchi, C., ... & Kogan, C. S. (2019). Developing behavioural indicators for intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour for ICD-11 disorders of intellectual development. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 63(5), 386-407.