

WASHINGTON SPEECH AND HEARING ASSOCIATION

Suggested Guidelines for Evaluation and Identification of Students with Communication Disorders

Background

In 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was rewritten with a number of changes impacting special education programs nationally. In our state this resulted in many changes to the Washington Administrative Codes (WAC) which provide the rules and regulations for the administration of special education programs in all of Washington's school districts. During the WAC rewrite process, public and legislative comment directed the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to have our Codes reflect the language of the federal mandate as closely as possible. In response to this, OSPI did in fact adopt the federal language word for word in most areas, the definition for communication disorders being one of them.

In previous WAC language, specific criteria was established for articulation, language, voice and fluency disorders, but there were problems with the criteria. The old WAC definition for articulation disorders used an arbitrary number of speech sound errors with a vague reference to developmental norms. This criteria was written prior to published research in the area of phonological processing disorders and prior to children 0-3 or 3-5 years of age qualifying for service. The result of which was to not appropriately identify disorders in those populations. Language disorders were identified via age-equivalency scores that were applied differentially to children below or above age eight. Age-equivalent scores do not attempt to describe a range of normal performance and do not indicate how a child is performing relative to other children his/her own age. As a result, an eight year old could have a one year delay, which would be within normal standard score range, and yet qualify for services, while a nine year old would have to be three years delayed to qualify for services.

The new language is far less specific and, within its parameters, leaves eligibility decisions to the Speech Language Pathologist's (SLP) professional judgement and the evaluation and IEP teams' decision, which is as it should be. However, this did result in some concern on the part of district SLPs, building teams and administrators regarding intra/inter district consistency and debate over what was and was not a communication disorder. The federal mandate does provide direction in answering this question. It created a three pronged test to determine eligibility. First, the student must have a delay in speech or language as per WAC. Since there are no longer any specific criteria SLPs must determine eligibility based on the standards of the profession. Second, the disorder results in an educational performance deficit. Third, the student requires specially designed instruction.

WSHA recognized the need to provide some direction to professionals in the state to assist in answering the eligibility question. It has set forth some guides based on professional standards that may be used by SLPs and special education teams in the process of determining the existence of a disability in communication and its impact on the student's ability to learn. Please be advised that these are suggested guides, and the final eligibility decision for services needs to be made by qualified professionals and parents as part of the team process mandated by both IDEA and WAC.

Communication Disorders Eligibility Guidelines

Communication Disorder:

WAC 392-172-120

Definition and eligibility for communication disorder.

“A student shall be considered to have a communication disorder if there is a documented speech or language educational impairment such as stuttering, voice disorder, language impairment, or impaired articulation which adversely affects a student’s performance and requires specially designed instruction. All students being considered for eligibility for special education and any necessary related services under this category shall be evaluated in all areas of suspected disability and in accordance with the procedures in WAC 392-172-106 through 392-172-111.

Evaluation Procedures:

WAC 392-172-108 (4)

“(4) A variety of assessment tools and strategies shall be used to gather relevant functional and developmental information about the student, including information provided by the parents, and information related to enabling the student to be involved in and progress in the general education curriculum (or for a preschool child, to participate in appropriate activities), ...

(5) No single procedure shall be the sole criterion for determining a student’s eligibility or disabling condition and/or for determining the appropriate educational program for a student.

(8) Any standardized tests and other evaluation materials that are given to a student shall have been validated for the specific purpose for which they are used and shall accurately reflect whatever factors the tests are designed to measure. **If properly validated tests are unavailable, each member of the group shall use professional judgment to determine eligibility for special education based on other evidence of the existence of a disability and need for special education. This professional judgment shall be documented in the evaluation report. If an assessment is not conducted under standard conditions, a description of the extent to which it varied from standard conditions (e.g., the qualifications of the person administering the test, or the method of test administration) must be included in the evaluation report.”**

Other Procedures:

Assessment procedures, other than standardized tests, may include the analysis of information gathered via:

Language sample

Checklists or scales

Student observation,

Parent/teacher/student interviews and/or consultation

Previous testing

Evidence of Negative Educational Impact:

Codes for the extent of educational impact.

A. The student performs effectively most of the time with some assistance.

B. The student needs more cues, models, explanations, checks on progress or assistance than the typical student in his/her class. He/she may need some general education curriculum/program accommodations.

C. The student does not perform effectively most of the time, despite the provision of general education modifications and supports, e.g., prompts, cues, modeling, curriculum/program adjustments, accommodations.

Need for Specially Designed Instruction:

See attached WSASP: Professional Practices in Defining Need for Special Education Services

1. Mismatch between general education curriculum and student performance

2. Accommodations were insufficient/ineffective

3. Services need to be designed and supervised and/or provided by an SLP

Standardized Test Scores:

In determining eligibility for speech and language services under special education, it is recommended that 1.5 deviations below the population mean (approximately the 7th percentile) be used as the threshold level for establishing a deficit. This cutoff should be appointed to composite scores of comprehension or production, or to overall test scores, rather than individual subtests. Eligibility should not be determined, however, solely by comparing a composite or overall score to this cutoff level. First, evidence that a deficit is functionally significant must be gathered and considered along with other background information before a determination of eligibility can be made. Second, measurement error should be taken into account. If a test administration appears to be invalid for any reason, test scores should not be subjected to usual interpretations and the reasons for invalidation should be clearly stated in oral and written presentations of test results.

Language Disorder:

Definition:

“A language impairment is impaired comprehension and/or use of spoken, written, and/or other symbol systems. The disorder may involve (1) the form of language (phonology, morphology, syntax), (2) the content of language (semantics), and /or (3) the function of language in communication (pragmatics) in any combination.” (ASHA, 1993, p.40).

Eligibility Criteria:

1. 1.5 standard deviations below the mean on one or more standardized tests
2. Standard score at or below 77
3. Percentile score at or below 7

Articulation/Phonologic Disorder:

Definition:

An articulation impairment is the “atypical production of speech sounds...that may interfere with intelligibility” (ASHA, 1993, p.40). Errors in sound production are generally classified as motorically-based or cognitively/linguistically based (Bernthal and Bankson, 1988). Motorically-based errors are generally called articulation impairments; cognitively/linguistically-based errors are referred to as impairments of phonological processes. While some practitioners classify phonological process errors as language impairments, for purposes of these guidelines they are included, along with articulation impairments under the category of phonology.

Eligibility Criteria:

The student achieves, on standardized tests or procedures, one or more of the following:

1. 1.5 standard deviations below the mean
2. Intelligibility rating of moderate to severe
3. Phonological process rating of moderate to severe (excessive)
4. Standard score at or below 77
5. Percentile score at or below 7

Consideration should be given to the student’s physical ability and/or history of therapy.

Fluency Disorder:

Definition:

A fluency impairment is “an interruption in the flow of speaking, characterized by atypical rate, rhythm, and repetitions in sounds, syllables, words, and phrases. This may be accompanied by excessive tension, struggle behaviors, and secondary mannerisms” (ASHA, 1993, p.40).

Eligibility Criteria:

1. Severity rating of moderate to severe
2. 1.5 standard deviations below the mean on one or more standardized tests
3. Standard score at or below 77
4. Percentile score at or below 7
5. Conversational sample in which some or all of the following are exhibited:
 - a. Secondary behaviors, how do they manifest themselves
 - b. Repetitions, frequency and type
 - c. Blocks in air flow and their average length
 - d. Frequency of occurrence of stuttering behaviors, (e.g., stutters on more than 10% of speech – Stuttering Foundation of America, 7stuttered words per minute as measured by a 5 minute reading, monologue, conversational samples - Monterey Fluency Program)
 - e. Duration of stuttering behaviors over time, the number of dysfluencies exhibited have maintained or increased over time.

Voice Disorder:

Definition:

A voice impairment is defined as “the abnormal production and/or absence of vocal quality, pitch, loudness, resonance, and/or duration which is inappropriate for an individual’s age and/or sex” (ASHA, 1993, p. 40).

Eligibility Criteria:

1. Vocal quality, pitch, loudness, resonance, and/or duration fall outside the normal range as measured by spectrograph, (e.g., Dr. Speech)
2. Score of inadequate on a voice profile or index.
3. Physician’s referral.

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