

Families often receive school evaluation reports filled with unfamiliar words, numbers, charts, and testing language. It can feel overwhelming to read terms like “standard score,” “percentile rank,” “processing speed,” “adaptive behavior,” or “below average range.”

This document focuses on understanding common evaluation terms and results in psychoeducational, speech-language, behavioral, occupational therapy, and other school evaluation reports. PEATC also has a separate resource explaining the different types of assessments schools may use.

### Important Reminder

No single test score tells the whole story about a child. Evaluation reports should be interpreted as one part of a larger picture that includes parent input, teacher observations, classroom performance, work samples, functional needs, behavioral and social-emotional functioning, and, when appropriate, medical or outside information. A child is much more than a number on a test.

### Common Terms Families May See in Evaluation Reports

#### Understanding Scores and Test Results

**Standard Score:** A standard score **compares a child’s performance to that of other children the same age.** Many standardized tests use:

- 85-115 = Average range
- 70-85 = Below average
- 70 and below = Significantly below average
- 115–130 = Above average
- Above 130 = Significantly above average

Different tests may use different score ranges. A score in the “average” range does not automatically mean a child does not need help. A child may still struggle academically, socially, behaviorally, or functionally. It’s important to compare scores vs. the descriptive information provided.

**Standard Deviation:** Standard deviation measures how far a score is from the average. On many tests, the average standard score is 100, and each standard deviation is 15 points. Standard deviation helps teams understand whether a score is close to average or significantly different from what is typical for students the same age.

**Percentile Rank:** A percentile rank **compares a child’s performance to that of other same-age students.** Percentiles do NOT mean the percentage of answers a child got correct.

For example:

- 50th percentile = about half the children scored higher, and about half scored lower
- 25th percentile = about 75 out of 100 children scored higher, and about 25 out of 100 scored the same or lower
- 90th percentile = scored as well as or better than 90 out of 100 students

**Average:** “Average” is a wide range, **not a single score.** Children can still have real struggles even when some scores fall in the average range. For example:

- A student may have average reading scores but struggle greatly with writing.
- A student may have average cognitive abilities but severe anxiety.

The team should look at the whole child—not just whether scores are “average.”

**Strengths and Weaknesses:** Evaluation reports often identify “strengths” and “weaknesses.” A strength is **an area where a child performs relatively well**. A weakness is an **area that is more difficult for the child** than it is for their peers or compared to the child’s other skills. Sometimes a child may have strong skills in one area and struggle in another. This pattern can help identify disability-related needs.

**Relative Weakness:** A relative weakness means **a skill area that is weaker compared to the child’s other abilities**. For example, a student may have very strong verbal skills but a weaker processing speed. Even if the weaker score technically falls in the average range, it may still significantly affect school performance.

**Baseline Data:** Baseline data describes a **student’s current level of functioning before interventions or goals** begin. Baseline information helps teams measure progress, develop IEP goals, and determine present levels of performance. Good baseline data should be clear, specific, and measurable.

## Thinking and Learning Skills

**Cognitive Ability:** Cognitive ability refers to **thinking and learning skills**. Reports may discuss verbal reasoning, problem solving, memory, processing speed, attention, and visual-spatial skills. Cognitive testing does NOT measure future success or outcomes.

**Processing Speed:** Processing speed refers to **how quickly a student can take in, process, and respond to information**. Students with weak processing speed may work slowly, need extra time, become overwhelmed by large amounts of work, have difficulty finishing tests or assignments, or know the information but struggle to complete work quickly.

**Working Memory:** Working memory is the **ability to hold and use information in the mind** for a short period of time. Weak working memory can affect following multi-step directions, mental math, note-taking, reading comprehension, organization, and completing tasks independently.

**Executive Functioning:** Executive functioning refers to the brain’s **“management system.”** These skills help students to plan, organize, start tasks, manage time, control impulses, shift between tasks, stay focused, and complete work. Executive functioning difficulties can be common in students with ADHD, autism, learning disabilities, anxiety, and other disabilities.

**Visual-Spatial Skills:** Visual-spatial skills help students **understand visual information and relationships between objects**. Weaknesses in this area may affect math, handwriting, copying from the board, completing puzzles, and organizing written work.

## Communication and Language Terms

**Receptive Language:** Receptive language is the **ability to understand language**. Weaknesses may affect following directions, understanding questions, classroom instruction, and conversations.

**Expressive Language:** Expressive language is the **ability to communicate thoughts, needs, and ideas**. Weaknesses may affect vocabulary, sentence structure, storytelling, explaining ideas clearly, and participating in class discussions.

**Pragmatic Language:** Pragmatic language refers to **social communication skills**. This may include understanding social rules, taking turns in conversation, understanding sarcasm or figurative language, staying on topic, or reading social cues. Students with autism or social communication difficulties may struggle with pragmatic language.

**Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC):** AAC refers to **communication methods or devices** that may be used when speech is limited or difficult.

## Daily Living and Motor Skills

**Adaptive Behavior:** Adaptive behavior refers to **everyday life skills**. This may include communication, social skills, daily living skills, safety awareness, self-care, and independence. Adaptive behavior scores may differ greatly from academic or cognitive scores. For example, a student may have average intelligence but struggle significantly with independent functioning.

**Fine Motor Skills:** Fine motor skills involve small muscle movements. Weaknesses may affect handwriting, cutting, buttoning, keyboarding, and the use of everyday school materials like pencils, scissors, and other classroom tools. These concerns are often discussed in **occupational therapy** reports.

**Gross Motor Skills:** Gross motor skills involve **larger body movements**. Weaknesses may affect running, balance, coordination, stairs, and physical endurance. These concerns are often discussed in **physical therapy** reports.

## School and Classroom Information

**Observations:** Evaluation reports often include **classroom observations**. Observations may describe attention, peer interaction, frustration tolerance, task completion, behavior, communication, and sensory needs. Observations help explain how a child functions in real-world school settings.

**Rating Scales:** Rating scales are **questionnaires completed by parents, teachers, and sometimes students**. They are often used to gather information about attention, anxiety, behavior, executive functioning, autism characteristics, and social-emotional functioning. Different people may rate the child differently depending on the setting.

**Educational Impact:** A disability must have an educational impact for a student to qualify for special education services. **Educational impact does not only mean grades**. It may include difficulties with behavior, attention, communication, social skills, functional performance, access to learning, and school participation.

**Adverse Effect:** Some reports or eligibility discussions may refer to an “adverse effect.” This means the disability **negatively affects educational performance**. A child does not need to be failing school to experience an adverse educational effect.

## IEP and Support Terms

**Accommodations:** Accommodations are changes that help a student **access learning without changing what the student is expected to learn**. To learn more about accommodations, see: [PEATC’s Accommodations Resource Document](#).

**Modifications:** Modifications **change what a student is expected to learn**. To learn more about modifications, see: [PEATC’s IEP Modifications Resource-Documents](#).

**Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP):** The PLAAFP section of an IEP describes **how a student is currently functioning** and serves as the basis of IEP goals and services. For more information about the PLAAFP, see our factsheet on: [What Should be Included in Present Levels of Performance in the IEP?](#)

## Questions Families May Want to Ask

- What do these scores actually mean in everyday life?
- How does this affect my child in school?
- Are there patterns of strengths and weaknesses?
- Were all areas of concern evaluated?
- What accommodations or interventions are recommended?
- Do these results match what we see at home?

## Possible Red Flags Families Should Watch For

Families may want to ask additional questions if:

- Reports rely heavily on one score
- Parent concerns are not addressed
- Recommendations are vague
- Data is outdated
- Testing appears incomplete
- The report does not explain the educational impact
- Observations conflict with what families and teachers see

## Final Thoughts

Evaluation reports can feel intimidating at first, but families do not need to become testing experts to participate meaningfully in the process. Understanding common evaluation terms can help families:

- Better understand reports
- Participate more confidently in meetings
- Ask informed questions
- Advocate effectively for appropriate supports and services

Families are equal members of the IEP team, and their observations and concerns matter.

## Resources

Disability Rights California – Understanding Psycho Educational Evaluations

Dredf.org – Common Educational Tests Used for Assessments for Special Education

Includenyc – Understanding Evaluation Reports

Kansas University – Assessment and Evaluation in Special Education

PEATC - [Bell-Curve](#)

PEATC - [Understanding the Different Types of Assessments](#)

Understood.com – What Evaluation Testing Results Mean



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