

When a child is identified as possibly having a developmental disorder such as Autism, parents typically want answers—and fast. What is wrong? What needs to be done? What is the long term picture? These are all normal and natural questions to have and the anxiety of waiting to know can be intense. It can be tempting to jump in to treatment as quickly as possible.

However, in the long run, it is far better to ensure that your child first gets a good, comprehensive assessment. A good assessment clarifies exactly what the problems are, forms the foundation for both short and long term planning, and provides a baseline by which to measure progress.

How can you know if your child is getting a competent assessment? The following are some key features of a good assessment:

- Is conducted by a qualified professional or professional team. Should include a Certified Behavior Analyst, Clinical Psychologist, or Social Worker, with expertise in the field of Applied Behavior Analysis.
- Describes challenging behavior(s) in observable and measurable terms. For example, an assessment might state that a child “engages in aggressive behavior consisting of attempts to hit, scratch, or pull the hair of peers” rather than “is violent with peers.”
- Requires information from a variety of sources, including direct observation, review of relevant history, and indirect information-gathering techniques such as questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. When possible, includes observations in different settings such as the school, home, and community as well as interviews with multiple informants such as parents, teachers, and other caregivers.
- Collects data using appropriate tools for measurement that describe specific behaviors, including such details as where, when and with whom such behaviors typically occur (i.e., Scatterplots, ABC charts, and indirect functional assessment tools such as the QABF),
- Provides accurate and reliable description of data collected, establishes baselines, and defines criteria for evaluating outcomes.
- Establishes clear hypotheses regarding the function(s) of problem behavior(s)—i.e., tries to explain why child engages in a specific maladaptive behavior.
- Tests whether these hypotheses are valid.
- Develops a positive behavior support plan that addresses the function of the maladaptive behavior(s) in more socially appropriate ways.
- A positive behavior support plan typically includes:
 - skills training to increase appropriate behaviors,
 - changes that can be made in the environment to reduce or prevent problem behaviors,and
- strategies to replace problem behaviors with appropriate behaviors that serve the same

function.