

Cognitive assessments to support the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) and Disability Inclusion

Frequently Asked Questions May 2022

1. What is a cognitive assessment?

A cognitive assessment is a test of thinking and problem-solving skills. It can also be called an intelligence test or IQ test. It often gives an idea of a student's ability to learn. It is not a test of reading, writing, maths, speech, or language ability. A student's test scores can be affected by many things. Their scores could be slightly higher or lower if they were tested again on a different day. Because of this, test scores should be seen as a snapshot of a student's current thinking skills.

2. Which tests does the assessment service usually use?

In Victoria, the Wechsler intelligence scales are used to measure intelligence level (IQ) to help schools apply for extra support for students with a disability. These include:

- *Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence – Fourth Edition, Australian and New Zealand Standardised Edition (WPPSI-IV^{A&NZ})*
- *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Fifth Edition, Australian and New Zealand Standardised Edition (WISC-V^{A&NZ})*
- *Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale – Fourth Edition, Australian and New Zealand Language Adapted Edition (WAIS-IV A&NZ Language Adapted Edition)*

The psychologist gives spoken instructions and the student uses speech to answer some of the questions. There are a small number of students who may need a different test because they have difficulty speaking or understanding things said to them during a test. A 'nonverbal' test may help the school and family better understand the student's thinking skills.

3. What is a nonverbal cognitive test?

Nonverbal tests measure *general intelligence* like the commonly used Wechsler tests do¹. 'Nonverbal' means the test does not use spoken words. Nonverbal tests measure overall thinking and problem-solving skills, not just nonverbal thinking skills.

Instructions use hand gestures instead of words. A student answers by pointing or using objects. This takes away the need for a student to speak and understand things said to them during the test. This means they will not get low scores because of language or other difficulties. It helps make sure the test scores show their true thinking skills.

¹ Like the more common Wechsler tests, nonverbal tests such as the *Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test - Second Edition (UNIT2)*, the *Comprehensive Test of Nonverbal Intelligence - Second Edition (CTONI-2)* and the *Wechsler Nonverbal Scale of Ability (WNV)* have excellent reliability and validity. Data from the UNIT2 normative sample, for example, showed a high level of consistency between scores on the UNIT2 and verbal tests (WISC-IV, Woodcock-Johnson III and Stanford-Binet-5). UNIT2 scores were also highly consistent with another nonverbal test, the CTONI-2.

Some of the nonverbal tests include the *Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test - Second Edition (UNIT2)*, the *Comprehensive Test of Nonverbal Intelligence - Second Edition (CTONI-2)* and the *Wechsler Nonverbal Scale of Ability (WNV)*.

4. Why are nonverbal cognitive tests used with some students?

There are many reasons for using nonverbal tests, including for students who have complex communication needs, or hearing or vision problems. They are also good for a student who does not talk to people they do not know or has not spoken English for very long. Nonverbal tests are useful for a student who has missed a lot of school or lived in a different culture. For these students, it is important that the test used gives them the best chance to understand and participate in the test.

Students with complex communication needs, physical disabilities, or other conditions such as autism, do not necessarily have an intellectual disability, even though they often have high functional needs. When assessing students, it is important to work out why test scores are low. Low test scores may not always be due to low cognitive ability. Sometimes low scores can be because a student does not have the language to understand or give a verbal response.

Nonverbal tests are fairer and more appropriate for some students. They take away the need to speak and understand words. This makes sure the results give a true picture of their thinking skills, and low scores or difficulty participating in the test are not due to language or other difficulties. This means that some students who have been unable to take part in a test that relies on speaking and understanding words may be able to participate in a nonverbal test. This gives us more information about a student's thinking skills and their strengths and challenges.

The assessing psychologist chooses the best test for each student². They have specialised knowledge in assessing for and diagnosing intellectual disability. They consider each student's ability to access and participate in the assessment process. This decision needs careful consideration by the psychologist, who looks at the referral information from the school and family, and other professionals. They also check the student's language skills when they meet them.

In some cases, a nonverbal test provides additional information to clarify a student's thinking skills after completing a WPPSI-IV, WISC-V, or WAIS-IV.

5. Is a nonverbal cognitive test less likely to find out if a student has an intellectual disability?

No. It is important that cognitive tests can accurately identify all levels of cognitive ability. This means that students with low ability will be identified, and an intellectual disability will not be missed. The verbal and nonverbal tests used by Assessments Australia are equally good at identifying whether a student has an intellectual disability or not.

² Psychologists use advice from senior professional staff at Assessments Australia, professional guidelines, and the Australian Psychological Society's guidelines for ethical practice in psychology.

Information collected by Assessments Australia during 2020-2021 shows that students assessed with a nonverbal test are no less likely to meet the PSD eligibility criteria for intellectual disability than those assessed with a test that relies on understanding and using words:

70.08% of students assessed with a **WPPSI-IV, WISC-V, or WAIS-IV** for their PSD review continued to meet the eligibility criteria for the intellectual disability category.

84.86% of students assessed with the **UNIT2, CTONI-2 or WNV** for their PSD review continued to meet the eligibility criteria for the intellectual disability category.

This was also seen with cognitive tests done for prep entry, student transfers and new student referrals.

6. How can I find out more about the cognitive assessment of a student?

Assessments Australia psychologists provide written reports and verbal feedback to the school and family after an assessment. If the parent/carer(s), school staff, Student Support Services staff, or other professionals need more information about the report or the assessment process, they are welcome to contact Assessments Australia for additional feedback.