

**Technical Assistance Paper****312530****Measuring Adaptive Behavior****Background**

An adaptive behavior measure is a specific comprehensive assessment of independent living skills. It is an important tool in eligibility consideration for students with mental handicaps and in the continual development of effective educational interventions. Using research-based assessments to measure adaptive behavior will help to ensure that only those students who meet specific criteria will be found eligible. Parental input is an essential component of the adaptive behavior assessment process since there are many daily living skills that are observed primarily at home and are not displayed in the educational setting.

The Florida Department of Education (DOE) is concerned with the disproportionate representation of minority students in exceptional student education (ESE) programs. The DOE has entered into a voluntary partnership agreement with the United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights in order to resolve issues related to the disproportionate representation of African-American students identified as educable mentally handicapped (EMH). The Department is committed to providing technical assistance to school districts related to the use of effective practices in the assessment of adaptive behavior and the inclusion of parental input in those assessment practices.

The purpose of this technical assistance paper (TAP) is to convey the requirement that school districts must obtain parental input when assessing a student's adaptive behavior and consider this information when making eligibility decisions. State Board of Education Rule 6A-6.0331 (4)(a)2, Florida Administrative Code (FAC), states that ". . . the standardized assessment of adaptive behavior of students suspected of having a mental handicap shall include parental input regarding their child's adaptive behavior." This TAP provides individual educational plan (IEP) and individual family support plan (IFSP) teams with information about the use of effective practices in the assessment of adaptive behavior. This will assist the IEP and IFSP teams to make decisions about eligibility for programs for students with mental handicaps and to develop effective interventions to teach meaningful life skills.

**Questions/Answers****1. What is adaptive behavior?**

Adaptive behavior refers to the knowledge, behavior, and daily living skills that are necessary to function effectively and independently in a variety of settings. Adaptive

## REFER QUESTIONS TO:

Sheryl Brainard  
ESE Program Development and Services  
325 West Gaines Street, Room 614  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400  
sheryl.brainard@fldoe.org  
850/245-0478



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behaviors typically include communication and social skills, daily living skills, personal care skills, and other skills that are needed to function at home, at school, and in the community. A person's age is very important when considering information about adaptive behavior. What we expect changes as the person gets older. We expect older persons to have more knowledge and skills than younger persons, and behavior that is acceptable for younger children may not be acceptable for older children. For example temper tantrums, although not desirable, are not unusual for a two-year-old. However, this same behavior is not acceptable for a fourteen-year-old. The key idea is that functional expectations are related to a person's age. The measurement of adaptive behavior assesses the skills of an individual relative to the skills of his or her same-age peers.

## **2. Why do we measure adaptive behavior?**

State Board of Education Rule 6A-6.03011(2), FAC states the following:

A student is eligible for a special program for the mentally handicapped if there is evidence that the student meets all of the following criteria: (a) The measured level of general intellectual functioning, is two (2) or more standard deviations below the mean. The standard error of measurement may be considered in individual cases. The profile of intellectual functioning shows consistent sub-average performance in a majority of areas evaluated; (b) The assessed level of adaptive behavior is below that of other students of the same age and socio-cultural group; and (c) The demonstrated level of performance in academic, pre-academic, or developmental achievement is sub-average.

Students who do not exhibit deficits in all three areas do not meet eligibility criteria for programs for students with mental handicaps.

In addition to informing eligibility decisions, adaptive behavior measurement is important for identifying specific skills that need to be taught. Well developed adaptive behavior skills are just as important to a student's success as well developed academic skills. Most students acquire adaptive behavior skills through practical experiences. Some students with disabilities, however, do not acquire these skills without direct instruction. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of adaptive behavior is necessary to develop interventions to teach and reinforce these necessary skills.

## **3. How is adaptive behavior measured?**

The assessment of adaptive behavior focuses on two major issues. These include the degree to which an individual is able to function and maintain him/herself independently and the degree to which an individual meets the culturally imposed demands of personal and social responsibilities.

Measurement of adaptive behavior should survey a student's behavior and skills in a variety of settings including his or her classroom, school, home, and neighborhood or community. Since it is not possible for one person to observe a student in all of the key environments, measurement of adaptive behavior depends on the feedback from a number of people. Parents and teachers have many opportunities to observe students across settings and are usually the best sources of information about adaptive behavior.

The most common method of measuring adaptive behavior is through structured interviews with teachers and parents. An individual trained to administer an adaptive behavior rating scale (usually a school social worker, school psychologist, or school counselor) interviews the student's parents and teachers. The responses are recorded on a rating scale that assesses the student's skills and abilities in various settings. Information about adaptive behavior becomes less valid, however, when the persons being interviewed are not familiar with the student's knowledge or skills. It is extremely important for parents and teachers to provide information as accurately and objectively as possible. These rating scales are designed to address most, and sometimes all, of the following areas:

- **communication**—skills in communicating with others, talking, writing, using the phone, and other sources that assist with communication
- **self-care**—skills in toileting, eating, dressing, hygiene, and grooming
- **home-living**—clothing care, housekeeping, property maintenance, food preparation and cooking, planning and budgeting for shopping
- **social**—getting along with others in various social situations, interacting appropriately with others, being aware of other people's feelings, forming relationships
- **community use**—travel within community, shopping, obtaining services in community (doctor, dentist, setting up utilities), public transportation
- **self-direction**—making choices in allocation of time and effort, following a schedule, seeking assistance, deciding what to do in new situations
- **health and safety**—making choices about what to eat, illness identification and treatment, avoiding danger, relationships and sexuality
- **functional academics**—skills that are taught in school that are used on a daily basis including reading, writing, computation skills, telling time, using numbers
- **leisure**—using available time when not working or in school, choosing age-appropriate activities
- **work**—employment skills including work related attitudes and social behaviors, completion of tasks, persistent effort/stamina.

For school-aged students, communication, functional academics, and social skills are especially important. When students are in their homes or in their neighborhoods, other competencies such as home living skills, health and safety, and self-care become increasingly more important. All of the areas listed above are critical for students who are preparing to graduate or enter the workforce.

In addition to interviewing parents and teachers, three other methods can be used to collect information about a student's adaptive behavior. These include reviewing the student's records from schools and other agencies, observing the student in specific situations, and testing the student's skills by giving him or her specific tasks to complete.

Regardless of the specific methods used, it is important that information about the student's adaptive behavior is collected from a variety of settings (home, school, and community) and through multiple means of data collection. This variety will help to ensure that decisions about students are accurate and contribute to establishing effective educational programming.

#### **4. How can we obtain and use parental input?**

It is also important that the person obtaining the evaluation information has an understanding and respect for cultural diversity. All professionals must be aware that their beliefs and value system may not match the belief and value system of the student they are assessing. Obtaining parent input is important to ensure that school professionals are informed about how the student's behavior relates to cultural norms and expectations.

As indicated above, parents must provide input in the assessment of their child's adaptive behavior. Parent input on the possible cultural differences may impact how educators understand the student's behavior. It is important that parents understand how essential this information is in relation to their child's educational placement. This information can be obtained by sending a social worker to the student's home, by inviting the parent to attend a meeting at school, or via a telephone conversation.

#### **5. What if the student's parents and teachers do not rate the student the same way?**

Since different people can have different experiences with the same student, the information gathered may vary. For some behaviors, students may behave differently at home than at school, so the ratings may differ. When this is the case, the perspective of the person responding needs to be taken into consideration. To make sure that the team is making a decision based on accurate information, it is important to consider information gathered through a variety of methods. In other situations, the student's behavior may be consistent across settings, but observers' perceptions may be different.

It is unusual for all the information gathered about a student to be perfectly consistent. Therefore, decisions have to be made based on how the information fits together and whether there is strong overall support for a particular decision about the student's adaptive behavior deficits.

#### **6. How is information about adaptive behavior useful?**

Adaptive behavior information is educationally relevant for several reasons. First, it must be used to decide if the student meets eligibility requirements for special education in the area of mentally handicapped. Second, information about adaptive behavior deficits can be useful in establishing goals for the student's IEP or progress plan. Finally, since various adaptive behaviors are important across settings, parents can use the information that is gathered to facilitate their child's development at home and in the community.

#### **7. For the purpose of determining eligibility for Special Programs for Students who are Mentally Handicapped, how can the IEP team determine that there are "deficits in adaptive behavior?"**

Each formal adaptive behavior assessment has norms by which the student's results are compared. Deficits in adaptive behavior are determined by comparing the student's rating on the scale to the norm of other students of the same age and socio-cultural group. Limitations in adaptive behavior can be determined by using standardized measures that are normed on the general population including people with disabilities and people without disabilities.

## Formal Adaptive Behavior Measures

There are several adaptive behavior measures that have been developed by collecting information from samples of students and adults from across the country. As discussed earlier, these measures are often used to determine if adaptive behavior deficits exist and to determine educational goals. In the following table, the names and some important features of these instruments are described. All of the instruments described in the table depend to varying degrees on interviews with persons who know the student well. None of them can be used without the active cooperation and input of parents and teachers.

Parent participation in adaptive behavior assessment is crucial in order to obtain an accurate and complete measure of a student's skills. Without collaboration between school professionals and family members, it is difficult, at best, to assess the whole child as a member of the school community and as a member of the general community.

### Summary of the Characteristics of Some Adaptive Behavior Measures

Measure (Publication Date)	Age Range	Format/ Informant	Useful Derived Scores
American Association of Mental Retardation (AAMR) Adaptive Behavior Scale-School (1993)	3 to 18 or 21 years	Rating Scale or interview formats, Requires professional rater or interviewer	Factor scores of Personal, Social and Community plus 2 Maladaptive Domains
Adaptive Behavior Assessment System - Second Edition (2003): School, Parent, and Adult Forms	5 to 89 years	Multiple formats including rating scale (preferred), interview, and self-report for adults; Multiple informants encouraged	Composite, plus scores in 10 adaptive skills areas. The latter may be useful in EMH eligibility determination
Comprehensive Test of Adaptive Behavior – Revised (2000)	Birth to 60 years	Rating scale with behavioral “tests” that are used if the behavior has not been observed. Encourages multiple informants	Composite plus 7 domains, self-help, home, independence, social, sensory, motor, and language/academic
Scales of Independent Behavior – Revised (1996)	3 to 90 years	Highly structured interview conducted by professional or paraprofessional.	Composite plus motor, social interaction and communication, personal living, and community living; maladaptive behaviors included
Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales (1984): Interview and School Editions (revision expected in 2005)	Birth to 99 years	Semi-structured interview requiring well-trained professional; School form uses a rating scale format.	Composite plus Communication, Daily Living, Motor (0-6 yrs), and Socialization. No maladaptive behavior content

**Additional information about adaptive behavior** can be obtained by contacting your school social worker, school psychologist, guidance counselor, special education teacher, or district exceptional student education (ESE) director. In addition, you may contact the Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) at (850) 245-0478.