

COGNITIVE ASSESSMENTS COMPLETED BY THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY ASSESSMENT SERVICE

Frequently Asked Questions

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 and families understand students' support needs. 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-VA^{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.

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.

Instructions are given using 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.

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. They are not just used for nonverbal students. They can be used for students who have complex communication needs, limited functional language, 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 developmental disorder (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 developmental disorder. 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 is used to provide additional information to clarify a student's thinking skills after completing a WPPSI-IV, WISC-V, or WAIS-IV.

² Psychologists use advice from the senior clinical team at the assessment service, professional guidelines, and the Australian Psychological Society's guidelines for ethical practice in psychology to choose the most appropriate test for each student.

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

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 developmental disorder will not be missed. The verbal and nonverbal tests used by the assessment service are equally good at identifying whether a student has an intellectual developmental disorder or not.

Information collected by the assessment service since 2020 shows that students assessed with a nonverbal test are no less likely to be diagnosed with intellectual developmental disorder than those assessed with a test that relies on understanding and using words:

A recent sample from 2024 showed that 72.5% of students assessed with a WPPSI-IV, WISC-V, or WAIS-IV for their review assessment continued to meet criteria for a diagnosis of intellectual developmental disorder. In comparison, 85.2% of students assessed with the UNIT2, CTONI-2 or WNV for their review continued to meet criteria for a diagnosis.

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

The assessing psychologist provides a written report 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 the assessment service for additional feedback.