

Being assessed for dyscalculia

We are often asked how individuals can be assessed to find out whether or not they have dyscalculia.

There are some tests around, but unfortunately there is no general agreement as to what constitutes the best possible test.

Below we explore three types of test available. But before moving onto that it is worth considering why anyone should be tested for dyscalculia.

For children the main reason for testing for dyscalculia would be to ensure that they are getting the right sort of maths education. For adults, the reasons are less clear. Being able to say that one is certified dyscalculic does not give one any particular advantage, and probably doesn't say anything that one didn't know already. If as an adult you are unable to multiply 9×6 in your head, and find it difficult to estimate sizes, or handle concepts such as "one quarter of 95kg" then you might well be dyscalculic – but having yourself tested and being given the label is not going to make you any less dyscalculic. Also, since the average employer doesn't know what dyscalculia is all about, this is not going to help in getting a job. Being dyscalculic is not a recognised disability, so you won't even get a car sticker allowing you park in otherwise forbidden places.

The tests

1. General comparative tests.

This is the type of test provided in the book "Tests for Dyscalculia" by Tony Attwood. They are intended to be given by teachers to school children so that the teacher can spot any area in which a particular child is having unexpected difficulties. Thus if the teacher knows that virtually all the children in one particular class can multiply fractions, the two children in that class who constantly fail to grasp the concept can be given a series of tests to find out where their difficulty lies. It might be within the notion of multiplying fractions itself, but it also might be that the child has no clear grasp of what a fraction is. Or the child might simply not understand multiplication. The tests will quickly point to the area of difficulty, and allow the teacher to undertake some remedial action.

The book doesn't allow the teacher to say for certain that a child is dyscalculic – rather the tests are wholly practical, dealing with the much more important task of helping the child overcome the problem.

2. Online diagnosis.

Online evaluations for dyscalculia are available from www.dyscalculia.org/diagnosis.html. The fee is \$550, but since the service includes an email consultation with your child's school officials it might be that UK residents will not get the full benefit of this work. The diagnosis does not carry any official status, but you will get an official letter of diagnosis.

3. National diagnosis in the UK

It has been announced that the Department for Education and Skills is undertaking some testing in schools for children to see how widespread the issue of dyscalculia is in September 2002. The tests have been devised by Brian Butterworth, the professor of cognitive neuropsychology at University College London.

We have not yet seen the new tests but we understand children will be graded according to the time they take to answer the questions, with different response times expected for various groups.

The tests will be available to local education authorities from the publisher nferNelson, and as soon as more information is available it will be published here. The decision on using the tests will be up to each LEA.