



Initial and Re-evaluation of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) During COVID-19 – Considerations for MN Educators

This document is intended to provide guidance to MN educators regarding educational evaluation or re-evaluation of Autism Spectrum Disorder during the COVID-19 school changes. Although eligibility criteria, evaluation timelines, and multidisciplinary team participation remain the same, specific assessment procedures may need to be altered due to changes in the school environment. In school, hybrid, and distance learning scenarios will dictate some of the modifications needed. A thorough understanding of the student's history of social/emotional/behavioral functioning pre-COVID-19-related school disruptions and post/mid-disruptions will be critical in determining the extent to which the child's social, behavioral, and social-communication differences are chronic and pervasive.

General Considerations

- Prioritize initial comprehensive evaluations where FAPE has potentially been compromised due to delay of evaluation.
- For re-evaluation, the team should consider changes in the students' needs (i.e. increased anxiety due to COVID-19 impact) that may have occurred over the school closure period when developing the evaluation plan. Solicit parent and student input regarding their experience during distance learning prior to initiating the evaluation.
- Consider out-of-school time from the spring and ensure that data collected for the evaluation is longitudinal including prior to COVID-19 school closures. Sources may include a student's last IEP progress report and any data collection *prior* to distance learning including teacher report.
 - Consider relying more heavily on interviews (that focus on long-term behavior patterns and functioning) than rating scales that are more likely to be impacted by the school closure.
 - Document all changes made to evaluation procedures due to COVID-19 school disruption in the Evaluation Summary Report.

Evaluation Methods

Standardized Assessment Tools

Standardized assessment tools will be difficult to administer during school closure. Eligibility for ASD **does not** require the use of standardized assessment tools. A formal test of intellectual ability is not required but can help differentiate between global cognitive delays and ASD. It is recommended that you consult with your school psychologist to determine the need for intellectual testing.

A direct assessment tool (such as the ADOS-2) is **not** a required component of the ASD eligibility criteria and is likely unnecessary as part of a re-evaluation. If a direct assessment tool such as the ADOS-2 is deemed necessary, determine an appropriate alternative tool during this time of distance learning/needing to wear a mask. The ADOS-2 cannot be SCORED when standardized administration has not been followed.

Consider the following alternatives to a standardized ASD assessment tool during this time. Due to the brevity of these alternate tools, it is important to supplement any of these tools with detailed, diagnostic/developmental history interviews with parents. This will ensure you are obtaining adequate information to establish eligibility.

Brief Observation of Symptoms of Autism (BOSA)

This is a brief 15- minute observation tool of parent-child or caregiver-child interaction to be used only by those trained and experienced with the ADOS-2. The BOSA was developed by Catherine Lord and her group for use during the Pandemic. The assessor observes and guides the interaction through either a 2-way mirror or from a social distance of at least 6 feet. There is a free training on the BOSA available at <https://www.semel.ucla.edu/autism/bosa-training>. Scroll down to the third video for the BOSA training. Once you have completed the one-hour training, you will complete a Permission Use Agreement Form (the link is below the training video) to gain free access to the BOSA information sheets. While there is no cost for this tool, some of the ADOS materials are needed as well as several additional games that will need to be purchased. Visit https://www.semel.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/autism/pdf/BOSA_Training_FAQ.pdf for more information on the BOSA.

Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS)

For initial evaluation, completing the CARS based on all assessment information will help the team determine ASD eligibility. The CARS is meant to be scored as a summary rating after completing observations, interviews, and any developmental tests, etc. It should not be given solely as a parent-or teacher-completed checklist. Order the CAR-2 at <https://www.wpspublish.com>

Additional Standardized Assessment Tools for Early Childhood Teams

TELE-ASD-PEDS

This tool is appropriate for use with children under 36 months of age who have been referred due to concerns for possible autism spectrum disorder. The authors indicate that the ASD-PEDS may not be appropriate for children with flexible phrase speech (e.g., once a child is appropriate for an ADOS-2, Module 2). For more information on this tool, visit <https://triad.vkclearing.org/>

Systematic Observation of Red Flags of ASD (SORF)

This tool is part of the Autism Navigator Series and is appropriate for children ages 9-24 months. For more information on this tool, visit <https://autismnavigator.learnercommunity.com/SORF-Resources>

Developmental History

Due to the limitations in use of assessment tools, a detailed developmental history interview with parents is of increased importance to determine ASD eligibility. It is recommended that evaluators use a comprehensive developmental history tool for ASD. The Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised (ADI-R) is an excellent tool for gathering developmental history information related to ASD. The ADI-R should be completed by a clinician experienced in conducting clinical interviews and can be done over tele-conference. Formal training is not required to administer the ADI-R but is recommended. Training for the ADI-R will be hosted by the U of M via teleconference this fall (*information on this training coming soon*).

For re-evaluation, a review of the developmental history information from the student's initial evaluation will often be sufficient.

Observation(s) Across Settings

It remains critical to gather observational data across multiple settings when evaluating a student to determine ASD eligibility. However, evaluating a student's social interactions will be particularly difficult during this time of distance and hybrid learning. Students likely have reduced opportunities for social interactions across all school scenarios including in-person, hybrid, and distance learning.

Even if a student is attending school in-person during this time, decreased movement around the school and reduced opportunities for social interaction are likely to influence how they engage socially. Make sure to document these **environmental changes** in your evaluation report including fewer days/week in-person, social distancing requirements, wearing of masks, teacher expectation that student remains seated, etc.)

In Distance Learning, social interactions via synchronous online learning require a different set of skills including in such aspects of interaction as turn-taking, nonverbals, incidental social chatter, etc. In this case, it is of increased importance that observation data must be supported with information from teacher(s), parent(s), and relevant others. Additionally, functioning from pre-COVID-19-related school disruptions must be compared with that following these disruptions.

Teams are encouraged to think creatively in setting up observations during this time. For example, parents may be encouraged to record interactions from home or the community. Providing parents with instructions of what to record will help obtain a more "natural" sample of the student's typical behavior. Virtual observations of a student should also be considered. Including observations conducted during a synchronous group session (DL) OR during an in-person session (in-person or hybrid) is recommended. Technology such as a "[Swivl](#)" may be used to enhance one's ability to complete observations remotely (if available).

Parent and Teacher Rating Scales

Changes in environment and length of time/mode that teachers have had to observe and get to know the student impact the validity of rating scale results. As such, teacher and parent rating scales should be used and interpreted with caution. Many factors impacted by COVID-

19 will likely influence ratings and may not provide accurate information about a student's typical skills and needs. In general, checklists and rating scales for ASD have low accuracy and validity even under typical conditions (especially in the context of intellectual disability and/or emotional-behavioral challenges). Teams should consider relying more heavily on interviews that can capture the longitudinal behavioral patterns and functioning of the student.

When using teacher rating scales, consider the following adaptations outline in *MSPA: Assessment Considerations during COVID-19-Related School Disruptions: SY2020-21*:

- For valid rating scale completion, teachers need to know a student for the length of time outlined in the scale's administration and technical manual. To accurately rate a child's social/emotional/behavioral functioning during shortened in-person school weeks, the teacher may need longer than is indicated. For example, if a manual states that a rater needs to know the child for 4 weeks before providing valid ratings, if in-person learning is happening 2-days per week, the teacher may need 8 to 9 weeks of student interaction before being able to confidently rate their functioning.
- Should asynchronous distance learning be a primary mode of instruction for an extended period of time, an adult caregiver in the child's home who oversees their interaction with instructional content may complete the "teacher" rating scale IF there is another adult who is able to complete the "parent" version of the scale (i.e., the same parent/caregiver should not complete both the parent and teacher scales). Consult your district's practices for students who are homeschooled to ensure consistency of practice.
- Due to the low accuracy of rating scales for ASD, evaluation teams should use caution in interpreting results and should not rely on checklist results if they are not supported by other evaluation data.

Parent, Teacher, and Student Interview

Most students will have a different teacher (or group of teachers) than last year. If schools start the year in Distance Learning, a child's 2020-2021 teacher may not meet them in person for a long time. Thus, when interviewing a teacher, you will need to include questions about the strategies they have used to get to know the child personally during whatever learning scenario is being implemented.

Interviewing last year's teacher(s) to gain information about the student prior to the school disruption is optimal. If this is not possible, use caution in interpreting behavior/functioning based on teacher's perception of students they have only known since the school closure. In addition, consider interviewing other providers such as day care, preschool, occupational therapist, music therapist, or ESY provider.

As part of an evaluation considering ASD, many educators utilize a "[double interview](#)" process when interviewing a student. Michele Garcia Winner has developed this informal assessment to assess reciprocal social skills by having the evaluator interview the student as well as the student interviewing the evaluator. This tool can provide valuable information about the student's social interaction skills, especially when the ADOS-2 cannot be administered.

Putting it all Together

For initial evaluations, it is recommended that teams use the Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS) as a summary rating based on all assessment information to guide the team in determining ASD eligibility. Reminder: the CARS should not be given solely as a parent-or teacher-completed checklist.

For re-evaluations, if you have good data from the student's IEP goals and objectives you will want to include this in both the rationale for "no additional data needed" as well as documenting the student's progress related to their needs in the evaluation report. Additionally, the use of the Underlying Characteristics Checklist (UCC) in re-evaluation is recommended to teams as a talking point for determining prioritizes needs to target on the IEP and for intervention planning. Order the UCC at <https://www.aapcautismbooks.com/>

Determining educational needs will be challenging during this time of school uncertainty. Teams should consider both current and future educational scenarios when determining how characteristics of ASD impact functioning in "school" and related educational needs. Teams should emphasize information from parents during this time with their increased role as primary observers of their child's education.

References

- Minnesota School Psychologists Association (2020). [Assessment Considerations during COVID-19 - Related School Disruptions: SY 2020-21](#).
- WPS (2020). [Remote Assessment Guidelines](#). Retrieved from <https://pages.wpspublish.com/telepractice-101>.

Resources

- UCLA CART (2020). Brief Observation of Symptoms of Autism (BOSA) Training. Retrieved from <https://www.semel.ucla.edu/autism/bosa-training>
- Winner, M.G. (2015). [Assessment of Social Cognition and Related Skills](#). Retrieved from socialthinking.com.

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