

Formalizing informed clinical opinion assessment procedures is more likely to yield accurate results

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Informed clinical opinion or judgment is used widely in a number of professional fields to assess the presence of not so obvious behavioral conditions warranting treatment or intervention. Clinical opinion has been an important part of eligibility determination in IDEA Part C early intervention programs since the federal law establishing these programs was first enacted.

Researchers at the Tracking, Referral and Assessment Center for Excellence (TRACE) reviewed 20 studies that included more than 150,000 children in order to identify the characteristics of informed clinical opinion that were associated with accurate decisions about subtle child behavior differences. Headed by Stephen Bagnato at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and the UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh, a team of five researchers attempted to isolate what mattered most in terms of accurate decision making using clinical judgment as an assessment practice and procedure.

The focus of the review conducted by Bagnato and his colleagues was on those characteristics of informed clinical opinion that could



inform eligibility determination for Part C early intervention. Findings from the different studies reviewed by the TRACE investigators pointed to several assessment features that contribute to accurate decision making.

Findings point to the following practices that seem especially important when using clinical opinion for eligibility determination:

- An operational definition of the behaviors or domains constituting the focus of assessment increases the likelihood of accurate decisions and conclusions.
- Structured guidelines for collecting appropriate information help focus the assessment process on the operationally defined behavior.
- Trained practitioners who know how to use informed clinical assessment procedures and guidelines help ensure accurate decisions.
- Multiple sources of information obtained from different people about a child's behavior in different settings help produce the data needed to make accurate decisions.
- Consensus decision making by three or more people knowledgeable about the child being assessed contributes to the accuracy of the clinical-judgment process.

The common theme that emerges from the review is that formalizing the clinical-opinion process is important when the procedure is used for eligibility determination. What does this mean in terms of eligibility determination for early intervention programs?

Structure the informed clinical opinion process to insure accurate eligibility determination.

Using Clinical Judgment for Eligibility Determination

The table includes some key characteristics of the clinical-judgment process that can help when using informed opinion for eligibility determination. The inclusion of as many characteristics as feasible should improve the accuracy of eligibility determination.

Preparation

- ✓ *Define the behavior(s) constituting the focus of assessment.* The more specific the focus of assessment, the higher the probability that those conducting the assessment will fully pay attention to those behavior(s) constituting the focus.
- ✓ *Develop and prepare guidelines for conducting an assessment.* The procedures that are used to conduct clinical-judgment assessments matter in terms of collecting the data needed to make accurate decisions. Structured guidelines help tremendously in conducting appropriate research.
- ✓ *Identify the methods and procedures needed to obtain assessment data.* The guidelines used to structure the assessment process should be as specific as possible regarding the tools, methods, procedures, etc. used to conduct the assessment.
- ✓ *Train staff in using the guidelines and assessment procedures.* Get all those engaged in the assessment process “on the same page” by training them in how to conduct the assessment.

Information Gathering

- ✓ *Obtain the assessment data using multiple methods and procedures.* Use multiple methods and procedures to ensure that a rich array of relevant information is obtained through administering the assessment procedures.
- ✓ *Have three or more people gather the assessment information.* Multiple information and assessors will yield information from different perspectives, thereby providing a more complete picture of a child’s behavior. Those conducting the assessments should be knowledgeable about the children being assessed.
- ✓ *Gather the assessment information in multiple settings.* Child behavior more often than not varies as a function of setting. A complete profile of a child’s behavior across settings will provide a more complete picture.

Decision Making

- ✓ *Pool all the assessment data from the different tools, people, and settings.* Develop and use a systematic approach to pooling and analyze all the assessment information that is gathered. Like the assessment process, structuring decision

making will increase the accuracy of eligibility determination.

- ✓ *Engage the team in a process of aggregating and analyzing the findings.* What aspects of the child’s behavior did team members identify as most relevant? To what extent and in what manner did the child’s behavior raise concerns?
- ✓ *Make a consensus decision based on available information.* Determine as a group or team what the consensus decision or conclusion is about the child’s eligibility for early intervention. Does the child’s behavior warrant intervention, and if so, what kind of intervention?

Informed clinical opinion can be a useful approach for determining a child’s eligibility for early intervention. The process can be structured and codified by adopting the process described in this *Endpoints*. Doing so should ensure the accuracy of eligibility determination.

Table

Some Key Features for Using Informed Clinical Opinion

Preparation

- ✓ Define the behavior(s) constituting the focus of assessment
- ✓ Develop and prepare guidelines for conducting an assessment
- ✓ Identify the methods and procedures needed to obtain assessment data
- ✓ Train staff in using the guidelines and assessment procedures

Information Gathering

- ✓ Obtain assessment data using multiple methods and procedures
- ✓ Have three or more people gather the assessment information
- ✓ Gather assessment information in multiple settings

Decision Making

- ✓ Pool all the assessment data from the different tools, people, and settings
 - ✓ Engage the team in a process of aggregating and analyzing the findings.
 - ✓ Make a consensus decision based on available information
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This research summary is based on findings reported in Baginato, S. J., Smith-Jones, J., Matesa, M., & McKeating-Esterle, E. (2006). Research foundations for using clinical judgment (informed opinion) for early intervention eligibility determination. *Cornerstones*, 2(3), 1-14.