When is the Right Time to Seek an Assessment?

Part 1: Preschool through early Elementary School
by Karen Dearing, Ph.D.

Many parents struggle with the question of when to invest the time, energy, and finances to seek an assessment for their child. This two-part series will first talk about the various types of assessments and then discuss a variety of “red flags” that parents can be on the lookout for when considering whether or not to seek an assessment for their child. This issue will cover preschool through early elementary school-aged children; part two, to appear in the next newsletter, will discuss later elementary school through high school.

So what are Psychoeducational Evaluations?
Everybody has strengths and weaknesses in their cognitive and academic skills, and in some individuals, those strengths and weaknesses are pronounced enough to cause difficulty in traditional learning. Psychoeducational evaluations assess a student’s cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses as they relate to traditional academic learning.

Cognitive testing typically covers intellectual reasoning skills and processing skills such as memory, attention, and auditory and visual processing as relevant. Academic testing targets progress in reading, writing, and math, as well as specific processing skills relevant to particular areas of learning (e.g., phonological awareness for reading).

When a need is indicated, psychoeducational evaluations can also assess for the significance of social, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges, as difficulties in these areas can certainly affect learning.

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Dear Friends,

It’s my pleasure to introduce our Spring Newsletter. The word “spring” has a number of meanings, but two are appropriate themes for this issue: Spring as in “the season of growth,” or spring as in “move forward by leaps and bounds.”

Researchers in the mental health and educational fields emphasize that early identification and interventions are critical to the long-term success of children with learning challenges and/or mental health concerns. In our cover story, Dr. Karen Dearing, a staff psychologist, helps to identify the warning signs in young children that may warrant a psychoeducational evaluation. Once children are assessed at Morrissey-Compton, parents are provided with recommendations for follow-up services, including educational therapy, mental health therapy, social skills groups, and Challenge Summer School, to help treat the problem areas identified. On the next page, Challenge Director Ashley Koedel describes the benefits of this program. We look forward to another successful year under her leadership.

In addition to working with students, through our parent education program we are committed to providing parents with important information about how to support their children who may be struggling. In February, we held our second annual Executive Function (EF) Workshop for Parents (page 8), designed to educate parents on a variety of topics in the area of EF. The event, chaired by Director of Research Dr. Surina Basho, was sold out and received high marks from attendees.

As a nonprofit organization, Morrissey-Compton can provide quality services to all individuals seeking help, regardless of their ability to pay. One of the most rewarding aspects of our work is to hear the success stories of those whose lives were changed after coming to Morrissey-Compton. On page 11 we hear from the mother of Christian and Carlo, who were able to benefit from our services because of scholarship funds and whose positive outcome is a direct result of contributions made by our donors. On page 7 you will read about Gabe, an incredible student who has made Morrissey-Compton the focus of his philanthropy project. Not only is he an ambassador for raising the awareness of learning challenges in students, his vote of confidence inspires us to continue our mission.

The benefits of our services are particularly apparent in Juan’s picture on page 9. His sign, “This is the Best Learning Place,” hangs proudly in our Half Moon Bay office and is an example of the creative approaches we use in working with students to provide a real-world context for learning, such as practicing sequencing skills while doing something fun. Juan’s sign would bring a broad smile to the face of Rudie Tretten, our former Board member and biggest cheerleader for coast side services, who passed away last year. You are invited to an event we will hold in Half Moon Bay on April 17 to honor Rudie’s life and accomplishments (see page 9 for details). The demand for subsidized services is great in coastal communities because the educational needs of students are high, but resources are limited. You can help us provide additional services by making donations to our crowdfunding effort to support our Latino Families Outreach Program (page 7).

I hope you enjoy this newsletter, and thank you for your support. Please remember us on May 3 during Silicon Valley Gives. Your support can make a significant difference in the lives of students.

John T. Brentar, Ph.D.
A Welcome Summertime Challenge for Kids
by Ashley Koedel, M.A., Senior Educational Specialist & Director, Challenge Summer School

School can be fun! This could very well be the slogan for Challenge Summer School, a one-of-a-kind, theme-based program entering its 34th year on the Peninsula. This year’s theme is The Olympics.

A Cut above the Rest
What makes Challenge so special? This program, for students who have just completed K-6th grades, is the only private summer school in the area that is not part of a year-round school.

We meet the needs of our wonderful students by truly delivering an individualized curriculum designed for learning disabled and ADHD students. Not only does the program help maintain academic skills over the summer, but alternative, research-based strategies are taught by trained special educators to support reading, writing, and mathematics achievement.

Also setting Challenge school apart is its Executive Function and Social Skills curriculum, which is fully integrated into each classroom at a developmentally appropriate level.

Perhaps the best testament to Challenge’s success story and to the magic of the program is our very high return rate each year. Our greatest goal and greatest joy is to foster self-esteem and academic confidence. For many students, it is the place where they begin to shine, discover their own learning profile, and advocate for their individual needs.

Awesome Staff
How do we do it? In addition to a director and assistant director with many years of classroom and clinical experience, our amazing staff includes special education teachers, reading specialists, speech pathologists, behaviorists, and executive function coaches. This team is able to work together to offer multi-sensory instruction, effective strategies, and 1:1 and small group instruction when needed.

Our 34th annual Challenge Summer School program is enrolling now! We have relocated to a beautiful, state-of-the-art facility in Redwood City.

Our half-day program will run Mondays through Thursdays from June 20th through July 21st.

Reserve your spot now in this unique program, as it is quickly filling up. Visit www.morrissey-compton.org/summer_school.php or call (650) 322-5910 for more information.
Psychoeducational evaluations can identify:

- **Specific learning disabilities** such as dyslexia
- **Processing disorders** such as visual or auditory processing disorders
- **Profile of strengths and weaknesses in executive function skills**
- **Disorders related to social, emotional, attentional, and behavioral development** such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and mood and anxiety disorders.

While psychoeducational evaluations can screen for the presence of speech and language disorders, motor dysfunction, and sensory processing and/or sensitivity, assessment by a speech and language pathologist or occupational therapist (motor, sensory) is needed to fully understand difficulties in these domains.

**Timing is Everything**

Now that you understand what psychoeducational evaluations are (and are not), when is it worth the time and financial investment to seek one?

The goal of any assessment is to identify a student’s profile of cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses in order to provide guidance on learning strategies and supports that will be most useful to that individual. When present, diagnosis of specific learning disabilities, processing disorders, and other challenges that can significantly affect learning (e.g., ADHD, ASD, anxiety, depression) is possible.

**Early Indicators of Later Difficulties**

The rationale of when to test is based on knowledge of specific cognitive and academic milestones and developmental periods, as well as the vast research literature on learning disorders and accommodations indicating that early intervention and support (and therefore, early identification) is a key factor in how much improvement can be made.

For example, significant difficulty mastering the names of the letters of the alphabet, the sounds letters make, and how to draw letters and shapes (e.g., triangles, squares), despite repeated efforts to learn it or do it, can be an early sign of dyslexia and/or dysgraphia, learning disabilities that affect literacy development. Significant speech delays or articulation difficulties can also be a red flag for learning disabilities related to the development of literacy. Early intervention when a speech or pre-literacy concern arises is absolutely a critical factor in determining how much improvement can be made.

Signs of other conditions that can have a significant impact on later learning can also be observed in very young children. Extreme impulsivity and behavioral restlessness can be early signs of ADHD. Delays in development of social relationships and social communication skills (e.g., age-appropriate joint play, eye contact, taking others’ perspectives) can be early signs of a mild autism spectrum disorder. Early identification of these conditions through assessment can pave a smoother entry into school and help young students lay a solid foundation of academic skills, as parents and teachers will have advanced knowledge of how best to support such students and maximize their learning despite their social and/or behavioral challenges.

**Onward to Early Elementary**

In early elementary school, consideration of assessment is an upward extension of that for the
younger child. Mastery of the basic skills of letter naming, letter sounds, and letter formation, but marked difficulty with developing into a fluent reader and writer, can be signs of dyslexia or dysgraphia.

Significant difficulty with fluent reading can take the form of persistent errors when reading orally, considerable difficulty sounding out new words, and/or serious reluctance to read. Making transposition errors or letter reversal errors when reading words on a consistent basis past first grade is also a red flag for a possible learning disorder in reading or writing.

With writing, the focus is largely on spelling and handwriting. Marked difficulty with mastering sight word spelling, leaving out letters in words (especially vowels), sequencing letters in words in odd ways, and letter reversals are all no longer developmentally appropriate past first grade.

With handwriting, notable difficulties in letter formation, with spacing between or within words, or staying on the line when writing are all indications of graphomotor control challenges, which can seriously affect a student’s writing development.

Atypical difficulty with number sense (what numbers mean and the relations between them) and with early mathematical concepts such as telling time or understanding money can be a sign of a learning disability related to math. Also, challenges developing fluency in math facts (e.g., fast math in addition, subtraction) can be a sign of a math disability or could be associated with a dyslexic profile.

Other Considerations
Beyond specific academic concerns, the behavioral, social, and emotional challenges associated with ADHD, ASD, and emotional disorders can absolutely have an adverse impact on learning. The associated attentional and regulatory challenges can seriously undermine how much a young student is able to absorb in the course of the average school day. These conditions tend to have more blanket effects on learning across academic domains, but are no less important to understand via assessment. The academic skills learned in early elementary school are the foundation for all future learning. When there are holes in this foundation because of attentional or regulatory challenges that interfered with consistent acquisition of information taught in school, substantial challenges with applied academics (e.g., reading comprehension, written expression, math reasoning, and problem solving) can come later.

Finally, one of the most important signs to a parent that an assessment is needed is when they see their child and student feeling the struggle. Consistent frustration with learning, reluctance in learning, and/or stress around learning are all indications that, no matter what the specific presentation, an assessment may be useful to help the student and his or her parents understand what challenges are (and are not) present, and how best to support that particular student.
**On May 3, Silicon Valley Gives—AGAIN!**

*Every Gift Matters! Please Help Us Spread the Word!*

“Yes, We Believe There Is!

We at Morrissey-Compton may be biased, but we happen to think that **Tuesday, May 3**, when Silicon Valley Community Foundation will host **Silicon Valley Gives**, is an ideal time for us to ask you to make a special effort to give! Let us count the reasons:

- Your gift will help learning-disabled individuals who would not otherwise be able to afford Morrissey-Compton’s services get the help that they need to thrive.
- Your gift might be doubled.
- Your gift might be TRIPLED!
- **Gifts starting at $10 can help Morrissey-Compton win THOUSANDS!***

**Can History Repeat Itself?**

We hope so, because during this 24-hour endeavor, which started in 2014 and has raised **$15.8 million** to date, thousands of local nonprofits have the chance to raise money through a single online donation platform.

So far, Silicon Valley Gives has been wonderfully successful for Morrissey-Compton. During the inaugural event, Morrissey-Compton raised **$71,430** in gifts. In 2015, we raised **$71,421**. **YOU** are the ones who made it happen. And because we know that you are very generous, and that helping learning-disabled individuals is important to you,

*In addition to matching gifts, prizes are available to those nonprofits with the most unique donors, independent of gift amounts, during the event.

**How to Do It**

**Step 1:** On May 3, 2016, type the following url into your browser:

http://svgives.razoo.com/story/Morrissey-Compton-Educational-Center

**Step 2:** Look for the “Donate now” box on the right-hand side of the page, and follow the steps to help us reach our goals!

**When to Do It**

For updates regarding times on May 3 where your gift to Morrissey-Compton may be **doubled** or **tripled**:

- Send your email address to info@morrcomp.org to join our email distribution list.
- Like us on facebook.
- Follow us on Twitter.

**Help Us Do It Better!**

If you are interested in helping us motivate others to give on May 3 by putting up your own matching gift, please call (408) 396-8953 or email lyn.balistreri@morrcomp.org.

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**Let’s Do This!**

“*To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose.*”

This quote from Pete Seeger’s song “Turn! Turn! Turn!” raises the question, “If there really is a time for every purpose, is there ever a good time to ask people for money?”

More specifically, “Is there ever a good time for us to ask YOU for money?”
Meet Gabe, 13, who has been working on a mitzvah project as part of his seventh grade year and Bar Mitzvah study.

The school he attends happens to be one that, starting in kindergarten, devotes a fair amount of time in its curriculum to serving one’s community. At the beginning of this school year, everyone in Gabe’s class was tasked with identifying an issue of importance, researching nonprofit organizations devoted to addressing that issue, and choosing one for which they would personally advocate and raise money. The project lasts all year and involves writing a long paper and making a presentation in May that focuses on their organization of choice. Gabe decided he wanted to focus on raising awareness of learning disabilities and resources for an organization that supports youth with learning issues. And we’re pleased to share with you that that organization is Morrissey-Compton.

All the Right Reasons
Gabe’s choice stems from his personal experience with learning differences in general and Morrissey-Compton in particular. Gabe was first tested at Morrissey-Compton when he was in second grade, and his mother, Amy, says that since then we have been an important part of his educational team, working directly with his school to help inform them of his learning profile and provide input regarding what would help him succeed.

Being diagnosed with a learning difference is a personal and private matter, and it’s understandable that not every individual is comfortable disclosing this information about themselves to others. Amy reports that she and her husband have always made it a point to discuss with their children the fact that there are many people in the world who are not as fortunate as their family, and make them aware of the ways in which they are wealthy that go far beyond net worth. Perhaps this is the reason that from the time Gabe discovered that he had a learning difference, Amy says that he has been “loud and proud” about it, advocating for himself—and others—at his school. The whole family has been very open about sharing their experience, and when they started to recommend Morrissey-Compton to others, Gabe was able to see the difference it’s made in many lives, not just his own.

Bringing it Home
We’ve talked before in this newsletter about creating a culture of giving that goes beyond what each household gives monetarily. Now, as a fundraising professional (and one with an annual goal to reach), I feel compelled to ALWAYS put the following qualifier on that point: Our donor dollars are also very important to Morrissey-Compton, so if your personal situation is such that you can afford to make a personal gift, please do! At the same time, though, we do recognize that not everybody has the means to donate as much or as frequently as they’d like, so with that in mind, we are referring to other ways that the community at large, and each family specifically, can create a culture that incorporates giving into its daily life.

Gabe’s project is a wonderful example of the culture of giving that we’re trying to create at Morrissey-Compton—one that starts at home, and carries out into the rest of the world. We truly appreciate Gabe’s efforts on our behalf, and hope that you find his story as inspirational as we do!

Crowdfunding to Help Latino Families
Much is going on at Morrissey-Compton, including multiple crowdfunding endeavors. Our Latino Families Outreach Program requires ongoing funding so that we might continue to provide scholarships for tutoring, evaluations, and Challenge School, as well as individual parent consultations and parent classes, to Spanish-speaking individuals, particularly in Half Moon Bay and surrounding coastal areas. If you would like to make a special gift towards this much-needed program, please visit youcaring.com/mckids.
The Executive Function (EF) Research Program at Morrissey-Compton organized another enlightening EF Workshop for Parents.

The sold out workshop was held on February 27 at the Arrillaga Family Recreation Center in Menlo Park. Over 200 parents attended the one-day event to hear experts from around the Bay Area present engaging and practical talks. Topics included:

- The importance of metacognition and self-awareness to EF
- Interventions and strategies for EF
- Google apps and assistive technology to support EF
- Emotional awareness and coping skills
- Problem solving strategies for parents of children with EF challenges
- Classroom accommodations and IEPs specific to EF
- The brain and how to use critical EF thinking

In addition, attendees were able to hear personal stories from an informative parent panel and an empowering student panel.

Attendees’ Feedback from the Day:

“I can’t say enough good things about this workshop. I attended last year’s EF Workshop as well and I have learned new things and strategies each time. The information is well presented, informative, and very helpful.”

“It’s so helpful to connect with others on these topics and to get advice and new ideas. I particularly appreciated hearing the students’ thoughts and perspectives, as they are the experts.”

“I want to thank you for a wonderful workshop. I don’t feel alone anymore, and it was wonderful to hear from both the parents and children that were on the panel.”

Recent Appearances

Dr. John Brentar presented to parent groups at Halstrom Academy in Cupertino on March 16 and in San Mateo on March 17 on Anxiety and Stress Management. He also presented on the topic of Anxiety Disorders to the SELPA 1 CAC at Santa Rita Elementary on March 16. Dr. Surina Basho also provided a workshop on Executive Function to teachers at Compass High School on March 16.

Bring a Speaker to Your School, Parent Group, or Other Organization

Morrissey-Compton’s staff experts are qualified to speak on many subjects related to education and learning differences. We offer several subjects for you to choose from, or you can request topics customized to fit your needs. For info, contact Sue Garber at (650) 322-5910 or sue.garber@morrcomp.org.
As the Half Moon Bay office serves clients with tutoring, educational therapy, and assessments, we also continue to play an active role in supporting the schools, both public and private, of Coastal communities.

We were proud to join other local businesses at the Half Moon Bay Chamber of Commerce Education Network Night to honor individual teachers with a crisp $100 bill to use in the classroom.

I had the pleasure of presenting the money, on behalf of Morrissey-Compton Educational Center, to Angelica Barrera-Cruz, a second grade teacher. We believe that ongoing collaboration with teachers and schools is a key part of supporting students with learning differences, as well as promoting quality education for all. We are also a PTO sponsor of Hatch Elementary immersion school, a sponsor of Alma Heights Christian School in Pacifica, and an annual donor to the Sea Crest School auction.

A Growing Need for Services
We have a waiting list for our Latino Families Outreach Program services. Dedicated to our role in the program, we provide a broad range of specialty support to students from second grade to community college in math, language arts, and executive function skills. We are very eager for financial support, not only so that we may continue to provide these valuable services to students like Juan (pictured below), but also to serve every family on the waiting list.

You are Invited to Attend a Special Tribute
We think of our dear friend Rudie Trett on often and attribute so much of our success to his grand enthusiasm, creative ideas about how to extend Morrissey-Compton’s mission to Coastal Communities, and his eager support and participation. We are proud and honored to continue his work, and would like to invite you to attend a special memorial in his honor on April 17 (see the invitation at the top right on this page for details).

Left: Juan is one of the many students who has been helped by Morrissey-Compton’s Latino Families Outreach Program. As you can see from the sign he made himself, he loves it! His sign is also a great example of an innovative learning technique: Denali, his educational specialist, says that they sometimes do origami at the end of a lesson to practice sequencing and saliency skills. Juan uses it as a medium for his writing (as here), and he says that it also helps him read, because he has to follow the instructions!
Parent Education

Spring Classes

Pre-Registration Required for All Classes
Visit www.morrissey-compton.org/parent_classes.php for presenter biographies, additional dates & topics, and links to pre-register via Eventbrite (required). For info, contact Sue Garber, M.A. at sue.garber@morrcomp.org.

Redwood City
595 Price Avenue, 94063

Making Sense of Executive Function (EF) for Your Child (Ages 7-18)
Meredith Feinberg, M.Ed.
Weak EF skills impact a child’s life in school, at home and in the community. Learn strategies to help your student improve working memory, time management, planning and organization, and self-monitoring.
Monday, April 18, 6:30 to 8pm

Connect to Correct: The Importance of Emotional Connection in Parenting (All Ages)
A. Cassandra Golding, Ph.D.
Research tells us that the human brain is a profoundly social organ. This presentation will focus on the ways in which children thrive on their emotional connection to parents. This connection is the best vehicle for not only emotional intelligence, security, and eventual autonomy, but for academic success and personal relationship health. Participants will be introduced to attachment concepts, basic brain development, and the emotional brain system and learn strategies for establishing and deepening emotional connection with children, navigating life’s inevitable challenges, limit setting, boundary maintenance, and gaining parental support.
Wednesday, May 4, 6:30 to 8pm

New! Monthly Support Group for Parents of Children with ADHD
Join our email list for details.

Groups for Kids

Summer Groups

Social Skills Groups help children increase their confidence and abilities in social situations at school, at home, and in the community and improve their skills in areas that include:

- Identifying their own emotions and the emotions of others
- Understanding the connection between emotions and behavior
- Showing interest in others
- Demonstrating empathetic responses
- Initiating a conversation
- Demonstrating reciprocal conversation skills
- Listening attentively when feeling bored in a conversation
- Asking others to play
- Joining a group engaged in play
- Collaborating in a group
- Problem solving in a flexible manner
- Asking for help
- Disagreeing respectfully
- Regulating emotions
- Losing a game “gracefully”
- Dealing with teasing and bullying
- Managing impulsive behavior

There are three to five children or adolescents in each group, who are close in age and have similar challenges and goals. Group content is individualized based on the specific needs of the participants.

Specific group meeting times and dates are posted at www.morrissey-compton.org. For more info or to register your child, email sue.garber@morrcomp.org. Please include:

- Your name and contact information
- Your child’s name, DOB, age, and grade
My husband and I first learned about Morrissey-Compton during Resource Night at our oldest son’s middle school. Cristian, now 13, had just been diagnosed with ADHD and auditory processing disorder, and struggles with slow processing speed/executive function. Cristian is such a sweet boy, but he was really having a hard time; he would call me from school, crying, because he was failing all his classes. We knew that he needed summer school, but also knew that the district’s program would be too advanced for him.

We walked up to a booth where two women greeted us with these huge smiles. I explained that my son was really struggling and we were desperate to help him with his self-esteem and to find better ways to learn. The booth turned out to belong to Morrissey-Compton, and one of their educational specialists, Ashley, explained that she thought our son would be a perfect fit for their Challenge Summer School program.

Other Pressing Challenges
After going home that night and reading about Challenge School, I thought it would be a dream for Cristian to be able to go, but knew it was something we could not afford. My husband works as a tradesman, and I went back to college about two years ago to work on my degree. But when we attended our interview with Ashley, the most amazing thing happened: she offered us a full scholarship for our son to attend Challenge.

Dreams Came True
Cristian loved Challenge. He learned to advocate for himself, feel confident, and enjoyed every day he attended. I am so grateful for how just one summer completely changed his world and made him feel so much better about himself. We would never have been able to send him there without financial assistance, and we can’t thank Morrissey Compton enough for this opportunity. Cristian went from failing every class and having no self-esteem to getting straight As in school and feeling great about himself. Morrissey-Compton also provided financial aid for us to receive advocacy services at Cristian’s school because we were struggling with getting accommodations in his IEP.

Once and Again
Morrissey-Compton also helped my middle son, Carlo, who is 10 years old and has had difficulties in school since kindergarten. Carlo has always been on behavioral charts and needed to be placed with special teachers each year. Finally, this year, when Carlo began 4th grade, I knew that something had to change. Year after year, with every teacher telling me the same things, and even we as his parents have trouble coping with his behavior on a daily basis. The school called a meeting with me to discuss Carlo’s issues.

At this time, I contacted Morrissey-Compton and applied for financial assistance to test Carlo to find out what was going on with him. Once again, Morrissey-Compton was there, like our angels, to offer us full testing for our son at a much reduced rate. We learned through the testing that Carlo has ADHD and a writing disability, and Morrissey-Compton has helped us come up with a plan to help him succeed that includes specific accommodations for his daily school life.

We will forever be grateful to Morrissey-Compton for changing our children’s lives. Each person that we encountered at Morrissey-Compton was so friendly and was always happy to help with a huge smile on their face. We thank Morrissey-Compton from the bottom of our hearts for all of your help and financial assistance.

You Provide Us with Purpose!
We would love to hear about how Morrissey-Compton has made a difference in your life. To share your story, please call (408) 396-8953 or email lyn.balistreri@morrcomp.org.
It is the mission of the Morrissey-Compton Educational Center to enable children and adults with learning disabilities and school-related difficulties to achieve their goals by providing the highest quality diagnostic and intervention services in a supportive environment.