

# How to Read Your Regional Center Assessment

If you have been referred to a regional center in California — or if you are a family member supporting someone who has — you may have heard the words “assessment” or “evaluation” and wondered - what does that actually mean? What are they looking at? And what happens with the results?

This guide is written for both the person being assessed and for family members who are supporting them through the process. Whether you are navigating this for yourself or alongside someone you care about, the information here is for you.

We walk you through the assessment process in plain language — what to expect, what questions to ask, and how to make sense of what you get back.

## What Is a Regional Center Assessment?

A regional center assessment is a formal process used to find out whether a person has a developmental disability and — if they do — what kinds of support they might need. In California, regional centers are private, nonprofit organizations that contract with the state to provide services to people with developmental disabilities and their families.

The assessment is not a test you can pass or fail. It’s a way of gathering information so that the regional center can understand who you are, what you can do, and what challenges you face.

### What counts as a developmental disability?

In California, a developmental disability is one of five conditions: intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, or a condition closely related to intellectual disability or requiring similar treatment.

To qualify, the condition must have started before age 18, be expected to continue indefinitely, and be considered a “substantial disability.” Under California law, a substantial disability means significant limitations in three or more of the following areas: communication, learning, self-care, mobility, self-direction, independent living, or economic self-sufficiency.

**Note:** Other conditions that are solely physical or solely psychiatric in nature do not qualify under this definition.

Not everyone who contacts a regional center will qualify for ongoing services. The assessment is the process used to make that determination.

## Who Does the Assessment?

Assessments are typically done by a team of people — not just one person. Depending on the situation, the team might include:

- A social worker or service coordinator
- A psychologist
- A speech-language pathologist
- An occupational or physical therapist
- Other specialists, depending on the person’s needs

You have the right to participate in this process — whether you are the person being assessed or a family member supporting them. If you are the person going through the assessment, your own perspective is especially important. No one understands your experience better than you do.

## What Does the Assessment Cover?

A comprehensive assessment looks at many different areas of a person’s life. Here is what is typically included:

<b>Adaptive behavior</b>	How you handle everyday tasks like getting dressed, preparing food, managing money, and getting around the community.
<b>Communication</b>	How you understand what others say, and how you express yourself — through words, gestures, or other means.
<b>Social skills</b>	How you get along with others, make friends, and handle relationships.
<b>Cognitive functioning</b>	How you think, learn, solve problems, and process information. This is sometimes measured through IQ testing, but that is only one piece of the picture.
<b>Health and physical functioning</b>	Medical history, physical abilities, sensory functioning (hearing, vision), and any health conditions that affect daily life.

<b>Home and living situation</b>	Your living situation, family support, and the environment you live in.
<b>Work, school, or day programs</b>	How you function in educational or vocational settings, if applicable.

The goal is to understand the whole person — not just what you can't do, but what you can do and what kinds of support would help you thrive.

## What Is the CDER?

One of the key tools used in California's regional center assessment process is called the Client Development Evaluation Report, or CDER (pronounced "SEE-der"). You may hear this term used by regional center staff.

The CDER is a structured form that captures information across many of the areas described above. It has been used in California's developmental services system for decades, and it helps regional centers document a person's functioning at a given point in time.

### A note about the CDER

The CDER is a useful tool for gathering information, but it is not the only source of information regional centers use — and it should not be the only thing that drives decisions about your services.

If you feel the CDER does not accurately capture who you are or what you need — or if you are a family member and it doesn't reflect what you know about your family member — you have the right to say so.

## How Is the Assessment Done?

The process usually includes several steps, though the order and specifics can vary:

- 1** An intake interview, where someone from the regional center meets with you (and your family, if you would like) to gather background information and understand your situation and goals.
- 2** Observation, where a team member spends time with you — at home, school, or another setting — to see how you function in real life.
- 3** Formal testing, which might include psychological tests, adaptive behavior scales, and other standardized assessments.

4	A review of records, including medical history, school evaluations, and previous assessments.
5	Interviews with people who know you well — family members, teachers, caregivers, or others who can give useful information — with your permission.

The assessment might take place over several visits or in a single session — it depends on the complexity of the situation and your needs.

## Understanding What You Get Back

After the assessment is complete, you should receive a written report. This can feel overwhelming — these reports are often long, technical, and full of jargon. Here's a breakdown of what you're likely to find:

### Summary and eligibility determination

This section tells you whether you qualify for regional center services, and under which category (such as intellectual disability or autism). If you do not qualify, the report should explain why.

### Test scores and what they mean

You may see numbers and percentiles that are hard to interpret. A few things to keep in mind:

- An IQ score is one data point — it does not tell the whole story of who you are or what you are capable of. Under current clinical standards, IQ scores are not meant to be used as a rigid cutoff on their own.
- Scores below approximately 70 are often associated with intellectual disability, but California's system — and good clinical practice — requires looking at adaptive behavior alongside IQ, not just the number alone.
- Adaptive behavior scores measure how you actually function in everyday life, not just how you perform on a test. These are often more meaningful for planning purposes.

### Functional description

This part of the report describes how you function in various areas of life — communication, self-care, social skills, and so on. It should reflect the whole person, including your strengths, not just your challenges.

### Recommendations

Many assessment reports include recommendations for services or supports. These are a starting point for planning, not a final decision. You have a say in what services are included in your Individual Program Plan (IPP).

**Tip: Ask for a plain-language explanation**

You have every right to ask your service coordinator to walk you through the report and explain anything you don't understand.

If something in the report doesn't sound right — or doesn't match your own experience of yourself — say so. Your perspective is part of the record.

## Your Rights in the Assessment Process

California law gives individuals and families significant rights in the assessment and planning process. Here are some of the most important:

- You have the right to participate in the assessment and share your perspective. If you are the person being assessed, your voice comes first.
- You have the right to receive the assessment report in a language you understand.
- You have the right to disagree with the findings. If you believe the assessment is inaccurate or incomplete, you can request an independent assessment.
- You have the right to bring someone with you — a family member, friend, or advocate — to any meetings or planning sessions.
- You have the right to appeal regional center decisions, including decisions about eligibility or services, through the fair hearing process.
- You have the right to receive services in a timely manner. Once the assessment is complete and you are found eligible, the regional center has **60 days** to develop your Individual Program Plan (IPP). (California law, WIC §4646(c).)

## Questions to Ask Along the Way

Don't be afraid to ask questions at any point in the process. Here are some that can help you stay informed and engaged — whether you are asking for yourself or on behalf of a family member:

- What areas will be assessed, and how long will it take?
- Who will be doing the assessment, and what are their qualifications?

•	Can I be present during parts of the assessment, and can I bring someone for support?
•	How will you make sure the assessment accurately reflects my real-life abilities — not just how I perform on a test?
•	When will I receive the written report, and will someone explain it to me?
•	If I disagree with the findings, what are my options?
•	What happens next after the assessment is complete?
•	What services might I be eligible for, based on these findings?

## What Happens After the Assessment?

If you are found eligible for regional center services, the next step is developing an Individual Program Plan (IPP). This is a written plan that describes your goals, the services you will receive, and who is responsible for providing those services.

The IPP is developed collaboratively — you, your family (if appropriate), and the regional center service coordinator should all be involved. If you are an adult, your own preferences and goals take center stage. Family members play a supporting role, not a decision-making role, unless you have asked them to speak for you.

Assessment results inform the IPP, but they don't dictate it. The plan should be based on your individual needs, preferences, and goals — not just your test scores.

### Person-centered planning

Good IPP meetings are built around the person — your dreams, your strengths, and what a good life looks like for you.

If you feel like meetings are moving too fast or not capturing what matters most, ask to slow down and refocus. The Department of Developmental Services has developed plain-language booklets to help you prepare for your IPP meeting. You can find them at <https://www.dds.ca.gov/rc/ipp/>

## Final Thoughts

Going through a regional center assessment can feel daunting, especially if it's your first time. But you are not alone — and you are not just a passive observer in this process. You are a partner.

Ask questions. Share what you know about yourself. Push back if something doesn't seem right. And remember that the assessment is a starting point, not a verdict. It is one step in a larger process of getting the right support to live a full and meaningful life — on your own terms.