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Communicating test results: Guidance for Test Users



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Psychological Testing Centre

Below are key considerations that test users should take into account when communicating test results. These are offered as guidance, as what is best practice will to a large extent be affected by the specific context in which the test user is working and considerations as to the purpose of testing and the situation of the test taker. Legislation such as the Data Protection Act (1988), other legal requirements and local policy may also affect the treatment of test results, again meaning that the British Psychological Society can only offer guidance on the communication of test results.

Types of scores

Raw scores: Raw scores should not generally be communicated to test takers or other parties who have an interest in the results of testing, as they are not usually meaningful in themselves. Raw scores need putting into context through norm referencing, criterion referencing or similar, and it is these contextualised scores that should be communicated.

Types of scores: Raw scores can be translated into a range of contextualised scores. Common examples include standardised scores, T scores, stens, stanines and percentiles, though some tests use other types of contextualised scores. One or more of these score types should be used when communicating test results.

Use of score bands: Some test users communicate test scores as 'score bands'. For example, a test score may fall within the 'average band' or 'below average band'. The use of score bands in test documentation is often inconsistent, as different tests use different numbers of bands, have different boundary points between bands and may use different descriptors for bands covering the same or a similar range of scores. If test users want to use score bands, it is recommended that they develop a local policy on test use that is adopted and used consistently by all test users in their organisation.

Item-level scores: Item-level scores should not be communicated to test takers, and in most cases not to other parties. In certain situations item-level responses may be used qualitatively for diagnostic purposes (e.g. looking at the types of words a child has spelt incorrectly in a spelling test), but when item-level responses are communicated it is the responsibility of the test user to ensure the recipient is appropriately trained to interpret them. Test users need to be careful that providing this level of information on a test does not infringe the publisher's or other party's intellectual property rights over the test materials.

Use of confidence intervals: Reputable psychometric tests should contain information on their level of reliability which, in turn, is used to derive confidence intervals. Test users should acknowledge the precision of measurement in test scores and communicate both test scores and their associated confidence bands.

Ensuring understanding

It is the responsibility of test users to ensure that any information they communicate about a test and its results, whether in written or oral form, is accurately understood by the recipient. Before communicating test results, test users should consider:

- the intended audience; whether they are test trained or not and their general level of understanding of tests and test results
- the purpose of testing and how results will be used
- what other information, if any, is being considered alongside the test results
- how results will be presented (written and / or orally) and what opportunities for review of results with the test taker or other parties are available
- any organisational policies regarding test use that exist and the guidance given in these
- their level of competence in providing the necessary interpretation of the results, seeking support from professional colleagues where they consider this necessary.

Developing local policies of test use

As each test user will operate in a different context, it is recommended that organisations develop their own policy on test use. As well as covering the communication of test results, such policies may cover areas such as selection of tests to use, data storage and training requirements for test users. It is important that all people using tests in the organisation are familiar with the test use policy and follow it. Test use policies should be regularly reviewed to ensure that they are current, reflect the organisation's needs and procedures, and comply with relevant legislation.

Provision of scores under the Data Protection Act (1988)

Under the Data Protection Act (DPA) test takers normally have a right of access to information that is held on them. If a 'subject access request' is made under the DPA, information provided to test takers must be in a form that is understandable. Information would therefore typically be presented in terms of a contextualised score, including information about the norm group or similar used in the contextualisation, and confidence band. A description of the test and construct(s) it measures should also be included to ensure the information provided can be fully understood.

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