

THE LD ADOLESCENT AND THE SAT

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*School personnel can help LD students prepare
for the SAT in a variety of ways.*

For most teenagers, the mere thought of spending three hours on a Saturday morning answering verbal and mathematical questions is upsetting. Handicapped students feel the same pressure but more so. Comments from some handicapped students who took the SAT underscore this problem:

- “With all that pressure, I just can’t think. I need large print and more time.”
- “It was long. I was really worn out.”
- “Seeing the spaces on the answer sheet is hard.”
(Rogosta 1980)

SAT test-taking is complicated by the fact that the learning disabled student may have limited or different exposure to standardized tests, especially group administered standardized tests, lasting three hours and covering such an extensive range of topics and difficulty.

Teachers and parents can (1) help students prepare for and cope with SAT pressure, (2) make special arrangements so that students can do their best on this college admission test, and (3) develop comprehensive long term preparation plans.

Special Testing Arrangements

For many years the Educational Testing Service (ETS), publishers of the SAT, has had a variety of special services available for students with handicaps. More recently, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which in general prohibits discrimination based on a physical or mental handicap, has had an impact on college admissions tests. First, it highlights the idea that such tests should reflect an applicant's level of developed academic ability rather than a student's impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills. Second, it requires test developers or colleges to:

- modify tests and test administration procedures for handicapped people;
- report scores so that they are indistinguishable from non-handicapped applicants; and,
- validate the tests against college performance.

ETS reported that they do provide for test modifications, that, on an interim basis, they are still identifying (flagging) scores earned under non-standard conditions, and that some validity studies involving handicapped groups have recently been completed and that more are planned (Jones and Rogosta 1983; Rogosta and Nemceff, in press).

It is important to know that students with learning disabilities are eligible to take the PSAT and SAT under special testing conditions. If special arrangements are required, a qualified professional (e.g., psychologist, physician, pupil study team member, counselor, learning disability consultant) must state in writing that the teenager has a handicapping condition that would interfere with his ability to take the test under regular testing conditions. The school counselor or test administrator then helps the teenager register with ETS for this special testing. When contacting ETS the following kinds of information are required:

- nature of the disability, whether the disability is permanent or temporary
- proof of disability
- test edition and practice material that is desired (e.g., large print, cassette)

- proposed test date and time
- name of test administrator
- the kind(s) of special arrangements needed

Special arrangements can be made regarding any of the following factors: time, physical arrangements, test materials and aids, test administrator.

Some teenagers need additional time to take the SAT, and time can be officially extended to six hours. When time limits are extended, additional breaks and a rest period are provided.

Learning disabled students with a physical impairment can request special physical arrangements such as a table under which a wheelchair could fit or perhaps special lighting. Other special arrangements include, practice materials, audio-cassettes for the verbal and TSWE (Test of Standard Written English) sections, large print test materials, and large block answer sheets. Requests for special testing arrangements are sent to: ATP: Services for Handicapped Students, Institutional Services, Box 592, Princeton, NY 08541. Forms requesting special testing arrangements must be received at least four weeks prior to the test date.

Since the test administrator can influence the student's ability to perform well on the SAT, it is important to have a supportive individual available who can relate positively with the student. The counselor and/or individual who makes the arrangements for a special SAT administration can select the test administrator.

Scores achieved under non-standard conditions are reported to colleges but interpretation of these scores is problematic. ETS states:

The individual circumstances that require special test arrangements are so diverse and the methods of administration vary so widely that the College Board is not able to provide meaningful interpretative data for scores earned in non-standard administrations. (Rogosta 1980)

The inability to interpret SAT scores obtained under non-standard conditions places the handicapped student in a no-win situation. On the one hand, these special arrangements allow teenagers to do their

best, and, on the other hand, ETS tells colleges that it doesn't know how to interpret these scores since special arrangements and conditions were in effect. One handicapped teenager appropriately asked, "Why take a test when the results can't be interpreted?" (Rogosta 1980)

Preparation Plan

Preparing for the SAT requires that school personnel (and parents) (1) identify strengths and weaknesses, (2) analyze PSAT and initial SAT results, and (3) prepare a specific and long-term study plan.

The first step involves identifying general strengths and weakness. These can be grouped into five categories: knowledge, work habits, attitude, behavior, and special. Figure 1 lists types of problems observed in each category. The "special" category includes specific aspects of the learning disability. For the LD student, problems listed might include inadequate judgement of time or difficulty in finding the appropriate space on the answer sheet. Strengths might be high verbal skills, especially in reading comprehension.

The second step is to analyze PSAT and initial SAT results. Teenagers should be encouraged to take the PSAT and the SAT early so that ample time is available for analysis and subsequent training (students are allowed to register for the PSAT in 10th grade). Figure 2 provides a list of questions used to analyze test results (Bisor & Markel 1983). Special education, reading and/or mathematics teachers need to review various sections of the test with the student, noting the type and frequency of items missed within each section and the reasons for which incorrect choices were selected. Without this type of in-depth analysis, specific deficits are missed. For example, in general test-taking approaches, some students are impulsive, selecting the first choice that appears correct. Other teenagers read all the possible choices but lack the knowledge to find the best answer. Training to improve these problems is different, and training in one does not necessarily insure success in the other.

In addition, there may be test-taking problems related to specific content areas. For example, a good proportion of

reading comprehension items require that students make inferences. An item analysis will show problems with this particular type of question and the teacher can then make plans for appropriate instruction and practice.

The third step is to prepare a long term plan that addresses specific problems, identifies training resources, and schedules time. The plan should be the product of discussions among school personnel, the teenager, and the parents. To assist with the planning process, Figure 3 provides a three-year checklist while Figure 4 provides a checklist to help review plans once they are developed (Bizer and Markel 1983). Frequently, several different kinds of help may be necessary: a tutor in a content area (e.g., math) who is also knowledgeable about learning disabilities and SAT type problems; a special educator or guidance counselor to make special testing arrangements; and perhaps a psychologist who trains students to cope with test anxiety or stress. Training should include instruction as well as practice and drill. It's one thing to know how to do a geometry problem—it is quite another to accurately complete a variety of problems at a rate of one per minute. Students are also advised to practice taking a complete SAT under conditions similar to those that will exist on the actual test day. For example, if a cassette SAT edition will be used, it's helpful to tape an actual SAT and then have the teenager practice using the tape and answering all the questions.

It is critically important to reduce and/or eliminate any factors blocking the teenager's performance. When students are familiar with a task, anxiety is reduced, precious time is saved, and undue fatigue may be avoided. Therefore, prior to the actual test date, teachers might want to know which room will be used for the special administration and check on its suitability. Showing the room to the handicapped teenager is also a good idea. An even better idea is to allow the student to take the practice SAT in the testing room prior to the actual test date. As with athletes and entertainers, a scrimmage or dress rehearsal provides valuable preparation.

Students with learning disabilities frequently have problems organizing their materials, time, and tasks. Teachers can provide checklists and guides for these responsibilities as part of the SAT training. Figures 5, 6, and 7 provide checklists for such purposes (Bizer and Markel 1983).

Summary

School personnel can help students with learning disabilities prepare for the SAT in a variety of ways. Guidance counselors and special education staff can: (1) schedule small group and/or individual counseling sessions in which descriptions of college prerequisites and pre-admission tests will be provided; (2) encourage teenagers with learning disabilities to take more academic courses or necessary remedial help; (3) analyze PSAT and SAT test and school grades in order to identify and correct skill weakness; (4) discuss with students and their parents and uses and abuses of standardized tests in order to plan postsecondary activities.

FIGURE 1 Problems Related to the SAT

Knowledge problems include:

- lack of mastery of basic skills (e.g., arithmetic)
- lack of understanding of rules and concepts in more advanced areas (e.g., geometry)
- lack of experience which in turn leaves gaps in some areas covered on the SAT
- difficulties in one or more of the following: remembering previously learned material, analyzing material, or putting information together as in a report

Work habits problems include:

- poor study habits
- test anxiety
- ineffective test-taking skills
- lack of organization

Attitude problems involve:

- unrealistic self-image and academic goals
- over- or underestimation of the importance of the SAT

Behavior problems include:

- poor self-control
- lack of responsibility

continued

Figure 1 continued

- inability to get along with peers, adults, or family
- inability to follow rules, and to maintain commitments in school and in the community
- drug or alcohol abuse

Special problems include:

- specific learning disabilities
 - severe physical, sensory, or emotional limitations
 - vastly different cultural background
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FIGURE 2 **Questions Used to Analyze SAT Results**

General Scores

- Is there a significant difference between the verbal and mathematical portions (e.g., 30+ points)?
- Is there a pattern of incorrect answers (e.g., scores are lower as test progresses)?
- Does the answer sheet look as though some single error was made which accounts for a high number of errors (e.g., the wrong box was filled in and then all the rest of the answers were incorrectly marked)?
- Do the scores show expected levels of achievement?
- What feelings were expressed before the test? During the test? Afterwards?
- What was done during the test to “do the best job” (e.g. had a snack to get extra energy)?
- Were there any problems that interfered with the performance (e.g., ran out of time)?

Subtest Scores

- Do the subtests indicate any specific skill weakness?
- Can the subtest scores be ranked from the highest to the lowest?
- Are scores on the subtests in keeping with expected results (e.g., student has a B+ average in English, but is weak on SAT comprehension questions)?

continued

Figure 2 continued

Item Analysis

- What types of errors occur (e.g., difficulty with word problems)?
 - Where do errors occur most frequently (e.g., beginning, middle, or end)?
 - Are questions frequently not answered?
 - Where do these usually occur?
 - Does it seem that time was a problem (e.g., all questions answered are answered accurately, but the subtest is not completed)?
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FIGURE 3
PSAT/SAT Planning Checklist

Sophomore Year

- Discuss post-secondary educational possibilities—including college
- Include vocabulary training and developmental reading skills (e.g., comprehension, speed) within the regular curriculum

Junior Year

- Administer and evaluate performance on an abbreviated PSAT or SAT
- Identify strengths and weakness and propose a plan to improve various skill deficits
- Begin training
- Identify which, if any, special testing conditions are necessary

Senior Year

- Write for a special testing arrangement. Discuss with student and parents the effects of non-standard testing conditions on college reports and admission procedures.
- Provide necessary instruction, practice and drill
- Consider setting up a study group

continued

Figure 3 continued

- Analyze PSAT/SAT results and revise study plans where necessary
 - Arrange for future SAT retakes
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FIGURE 4
Reviewing Plans: A Checklist

Planning Time

- Has a specific time been selected?
- Has a quiet comfortable place been chosen?
- Has all the necessary information been collected?
- Have costs and benefits been discussed?
- Have roles been discussed for both parent and teenager? (NOTE: Teenager should assume the greatest degree of responsibility possible.)

Goals

- Have strengths been discussed?
- Have problems been identified and prioritized according to time and/or financial constraints?
- Have 1–3 goals been written?
- Are goals realistic?
- Are goals listed in order of importance?
- Has a range of outcomes been considered? (e.g., 50–100 points on verbal section)

Schedule

- Has a timetable been designed specifying all time commitments (e.g., job, extracurricular activities, or vacation) until the SAT?
- Does the schedule seem realistic in terms of goals and limitations?
- Have teaching sessions been scheduled?
- Have time limits been specified for sessions?

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Instructional Materials

- How are materials matched with goals or problems?
- Who is responsible for acquiring the materials?
- How will effectiveness of materials be judged?
- How will materials be used?

Instructor(s)

- Who will provide the teaching?
- Does this person have the necessary skills?
- Are other teachers or tutors necessary?

Location

- Where in the community will instruction occur?
- Has transportation been arranged?
- Where in the home will studying occur?
- Will these places be available when needed?

Budget

- Have financial costs and resources been discussed?
- Have financial responsibilities been specified (e.g., student will work this summer to help pay the fees of commercial course)?
- Have alternatives been considered and discussed if costs are a problem?
- Are readjustments or alternatives necessary (e.g., two or three students will share the services of a tutor)?

Resources

- Have necessary or desired SAT resources been identified (e.g., school, religious organizations, commercial agency, tutor, or parent group)?
- Who is responsible for selecting and contacting these resources?
- How will decisions be made about the usefulness of these resources?

FIGURE 5
Organizing Materials: Checklist and Guide for Teenagers

Do you:

- have papers and books that you haven't looked at for months?
- waste time looking for things you have misplaced?
- lose SAT papers, exercise sheets, or materials?
- have a study area that is a mess?
- let things pile up because you don't know where to put them?
- lose important mail or announcements?

Then try to:

- schedule periodic clean-ups. Throw out things you don't use (old notes, broken pencils). They only add to confusion.
- find necessary papers and materials before starting to study.
- arrange materials in some systematic manner.
- make a labeled file or box for different kinds of materials.
- store materials and supplies in an easy-to-spot place.
- keep a handy box or file just for mail, notices and important papers.

FIGURE 6
Organizing Time: A Checklist and Guide for Teenagers

Do you:

- let assignments pile up because you can't decide what to do first?
- forget regular school assignments so that you can't study for the SAT as you had planned?
- have a hard time sticking to your SAT study schedule?

Then try to:

- write all assignments (e.g., weekly, or daily) starting those that should be done first.
- ask teachers for all future tests or project dates, and write these on the SAT calendar.
- see how long you can study and slowly increase this time in 5-10 minute intervals.

continued

Figure 6 continued

- forget to do SAT errands (e.g., pickup materials or make phone calls)?
 - find that your attention wanders when you begin to study?
 - write your own notes and tape them on your backpack or wallet. Write notes on your hand—it looks funny but it works!
 - ask yourself: “At what time do I study best?” Change your study time.
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FIGURE 7
Organizing Materials: Checklist and Guide for Teenagers

Do you:

- try to cram everything in?
- feel anxious if you don't have every minute planned?
- feel uncomfortable if you need to change your jobs or schedule?
- feel overburdened by the responsibilities of SAT preparation?
- want to study, but don't because someone asks you to do something?
- find the work difficult?

Then try to:

- be selective. Do only those tasks that are the most important.
 - make sure that you allow time to relax and exercise.
 - remind yourself that: “Whatever can go wrong, does.” Tell yourself, “Relax and be flexible. I have a schedule and I'll do the best I can.”
 - ask someone to help by testing you or sharing chores (e.g., rides or purchases).
 - get a study buddy to call when you get discouraged.
 - practice saying “No.” Say, “I'd really like to but I'm studying.”
 - give yourself a pep talk, “This is hard but it can be done.” Divide the work into smaller parts.
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