Common Traits of People with Cognitive Disabilities

- **May not communicate at age level:**
  - Limited vocabulary
  - Difficulty understanding/answering questions
  - Mimics answers/responses
  - Unable to communicate events clearly in his/her own words
  - Unable to understand complicated instructions or abstract concepts

- **May not understand consequences of situations**
  - Unaware of seriousness of situations
  - Easily led or persuaded by others
  - Naïve eagerness to confess or please authority figures

- **May not behave appropriately:**
  - Unaware of social norms and appropriate social behavior
  - Acts younger than actual age, may display childlike behavior
  - Displays low frustration tolerance and/or poor impulse control
  - May “act out”, become emotional, or try to leave if under pressure

- **May have difficulty performing tasks**
  - Inability to read or write
  - Inability to tell time
  - Difficulty staying focused and easily distracted
  - Awkward/poor motor coordination

- **May be unable to move from abstract to concrete thought.** Most people can move from concrete to abstract thinking without effort. For people with mental retardation, this is often difficult, if not impossible. If a word has both a concrete and an abstract meaning, the person will say “yes” they understand (concrete meaning) even when you are using the abstract meaning (wave vs. waive).
- **May deny having a disability.** The hurt and stigma associated with the term mental retardation is so strong that people will deny having the disability even when it is against their self-interest to deny it.

- **May have real memory gaps.** Memory impairment is a basic symptom of brain damage, and people with mental retardation are more likely to have these gaps than others.

- **May have problems with receptive and expressive language.** There is often a large difference between someone’s ability to understand and ability to speak. People with mental retardation can mimic expressive language well, but may have minimal understanding of what is being said to them. They may pick the wrong meaning of a word that can be used in different contexts, e.g. “right” could mean
  - right / wrong
  - right / left
  - having rights
  - knowing how to write.

- **May have a short attention span.** Like memory gaps, people with mental retardation are more likely than others to have difficulty staying focused.

- **May be eager to please.** People with mental retardation do not communicate on equal footing and have learned that life is easier if you say “yes” to people who are seen to be authority figures.
SCREENING QUESTIONS FOR COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

1. Did you ever attend special classes in school?  
   Yes______ No______ Comment:_____________________________________

2. Have you ever received Mental Health or DD services?  
   Yes______ No_______ Comment:_____________________________________

3. Do you get any kind of social security check?  
   (SSI=blue envelope; SSDI = brown envelope)  
   Yes______ No______ Comment:_____________________________________

4. Did you ever participate in Special Olympics?  Yes______ No_______  
   Comment:________________________________________________________

5. Have you ever had a job? Yes______ No______  
   Where?__________________________________________________________  
   How many hours per day/week, Comment:____________________________

6. Do you ever hear voices or see things other people don’t see or hear?  Yes______  
   No_______ Comment:______________________________

7. Where are you now?  
   Correct_______ Incorrect_______ Doesn’t know____ 
   Comment:______________________________________________

8. What season is this?  
   Correct______ Incorrect_____ Doesn’t know____ 
   Comment:______________________________________________

9. How many months are there in a year?  Correct_______ Incorrect________  
   Doesn’t know__ 
   Comment__________________________________________

10. What does “Waive your rights” mean?  Correct_________  
    Incorrect________ Doesn’t know________ 
    Comment________________________________________

11. What is the difference between a plea of “guilty” and a plea of “not guilty”?  
    Correct___________ Incorrect_________ Doesn’t Know_____  
    Comment: ___________________________________________

12. What does it mean to “serve time”?  
    Correct________ Incorrect_____ Doesn’t know____  
    Comment: __________________________________________
13. How many minutes are there in one and one and a half hours?
   Correct_______ Incorrect_____ Doesn’t know_____
   Comment:__________________________________________

14. Explain to me what “rights’ are. Correct____ Incorrect___ Doesn’t know____

15. Explain how a lawyer can help you. Correct____ Incorrect ____Doesn’t know___

16. Ask the person to identify the following coins as you put them on the table: Nickel, Quarter, Penny, Dime. Correct: ______ Incorrect_____

17. Ask the person to identify the coin worth the most and the coin worth the least.
   Correct_______ Incorrect_______

18. Ask the person to write the following after you say it: “Call mom at home.”
   Correct______ Incorrect_______

19. Set out two quarters, three dimes, four nickels and seven pennies. Ask the person to count out $.86. Correct_______ Incorrect_______

20. Ask the person to read the following: “Go to the store and buy bread, milk and sugar. Correct ___________ Incorrect _____.

**OBSERVATION QUESTIONS**

21. Does the person act or talk in a strange manner? Yes______ No______

22. Does the person seem unusually confused or preoccupied? Yes_____ No_______

23. Is the person’s speech hard to understand? Yes_______ No________

24. Does the person’s vocabulary seem limited? Yes_____ No________

25. Does the person have difficulty expressing him/herself?
   Yes_______ No________

26. Is the person’s appearance unkempt or inappropriate for the weather?
   Yes______ No_______ Other Comments:__________________________________________

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