



**CELF<sup>®</sup>5**

Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals

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Determining  
the Severity of a  
**Language  
Disorder**

## Severity Guidelines

### Individual Test Scores

CELF®-5 test scaled scores provide a measure of specific aspects of language form and content, depending on the test task and student’s response. Test scaled scores are used to compare the student’s performance to the typical performances of the same-age norm group. These scores are derived from the total raw scores for each test and are on a normalized score scale that has a mean of 10 and a standard deviation (SD) of 3. A scaled score of 10 describes the average of a given age group. Table 4.1 shows the relationship of CELF-5 scaled scores and percentile ranks to distances from the mean, expressed in SD units. Scaled scores of 7 and 13 are 1 SD below and above the mean, respectively, and are traditionally seen as the lower and upper limits of the average range of performance. However, when using a score for an individual test rather than an Index score to inform diagnostic decisions or determine eligibility for services, a stricter than usual criterion for performance is recommended. Use Table 4.2 to describe performance on the CELF-5 tests that use this scale.

Table 4.1 Distances From the Mean of Test Scaled Scores

Scaled Score	Distance from Mean	Percentile Rank
19	+3 SD	99.9
16	+2 SD	98
13	+1 SD	84
10	Mean	50
7	-1 SD	16
4	-2 SD	2
1	-3 SD	0.1

Table 4.2 Guidelines to Describe Performance Using Scaled Scores

Scaled Score	Classification	Relationship to Mean
13 and above	Above average	+ 1 SD and above
8 to 12	Average	Within + or -1 SD
7	Borderline, Marginal, At-risk	At -1 SD
6 and below	Low to very low	Below -1 SD

Note that when using individual test scores to make diagnostic decisions or determine eligibility for services, it is recommended that you consider a scaled score of 7 as borderline or marginal. With a scaled score of 7, a student is likely to be struggling in the classroom (performance as well as or better than only 16% of age peers). A student performing in the borderline/marginal/at-risk level on basic linguistic skills measured on CELF-5 may be a good candidate for further testing with CELF-5 Metalinguistics, which tests higher level language skills.

## Composite Scores

The Core Language score and the Index scores are composite scores. Composite scores are standard scores based on the sum of various test scaled scores. Because composite scores reflect a student's abilities in a skill area (e.g., receptive language, language structure) across multiple tasks with a wide score range, you can have confidence in the precision of the score.

Different combinations of test scaled scores compose the:

Core Language score (CLS)

and the Index scores:

Receptive Language Index score (RLI)

Expressive Language Index score (ELI)

Language Content Index score (LCI)

Language Structure Index score (LSI)

Language Memory Index score (LMI)

One way to determine the severity of a language disorder is to examine the deviation of a student's scores from the mean of 100. Table 4.5 from the CELF®-5 Examiner's Manual presents descriptions of the severity of language disorders based on CELF-5 Core Language Score and Index Scores.

Scores within 1 SD of the mean (between 86 and 114) are considered average. Scores below -1 SD indicate that the student is demonstrating below average to very low language abilities relative to age peers which may or may not significantly impact academic achievement and participation in classroom activities.

The criteria for identifying a student as having a language disorder vary among school districts and treatment programs. Some agencies use 1 SD below the mean as the criterion to

qualify a student for enrollment in an intervention program; others use 1.5 or 2 SD below the mean. Based on CELF-5 sensitivity and specificity values, the optimal cut score to achieve the best balance is -1.33 (standard score of 80). Using a standard score of 80 as a cut score yields sensitivity and specificity values of .97. Keep in mind that a standardized test score should never be the only criterion for placement decisions and that students who have language deficits may not obtain scores that qualify him or her for placement based on the program's criteria for eligibility. You'll need to plan how to address the student's needs within the framework established by your program.

Table 4.3 shows the relationship of standard scores and percentile ranks to distances from the mean, expressed in SD units.

Table 4.3. Distances From the Mean of Selected Standard Scores

Standard Score	Distance from Mean	Percentile Rank
145	+3 SD	99.9
130	+2 SD	98
115	+1 SD	84
100	Mean	50
85	-1 SD	16
80	-1.33 SD	9
78*	-1.5 SD	6.7
70	-2 SD	2
55	-3 SD	0.1

\*78 is rounded from a standard score of 77.5

Table 4.5. Guidelines for Describing the Severity of a Language Disorder Using Standard Scores

Core Language Score and Index Scores	Classification	Relationship to Mean	Percentile Ranks
115 and above	Above average	+ 1 SD and above	84 and above
86 to 114	Average	Within + or -1 SD	18 to 83
78 to 85	Marginal/Below average/Mild*	Within -1 to -1.5 SD	7 to 17
71 to 77	Low range/Moderate	Within -1.5 to -2 SD	3 to 6
70 and below	Very low range/Severe	- SD and below	Less than 0.1 to 2

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