Awareness of auditory processing disorder (APD) among parents and educational professionals is rising, along with the demand for diagnostic and treatment services. Still, few audiologists perform these evaluations themselves or even refer patients with suspected APD to audiologists who do.

While many reasons exist for this lack of interest or acceptance, the chief reason is that the tests in the available battery do not have good sensitivity or specificity.

But how can a test have good sensitivity or specificity when no gold standard exists? Many of the early APD tests were verified in adults with known lesions. Typically, in children, APD neither is associated with a lesion nor can be verified with neuroimaging or surgery.

**A MATTER OF NEURAL TIMING**

APD has similarities with auditory neuropathy spectrum disorder (ANSD). Some people with ANSD have normal audiometric thresholds but trouble understanding speech, especially in background noise.

If a person with ANSD reports hearing difficulties but has no testing beyond the audiogram and speech perception in quiet, the diagnosis can be missed. Auditory brainstem response (ABR) testing or electrocochleography (ECochG) is needed to detect the disorder.

Similarly, APD can be missed by the typical audiometric evaluation, but, in this case, the standard ABR or ECochG results are usually normal. The stimuli used in these tests do not pick up subtler timing deficits that may be present in APD.

In contrast, the auditory brainstem response to complex sounds (cABR) is a more sensitive measure of neural timing. Children with learning disabilities have delayed peak timing compared with children who are typically developing in the cABR, but not in the click-evoked ABR (Audiol Neurotol 2006;11[4]:233-241).

Similarly, children who are poor readers have reduced trial-to-trial response consistency in the cABR compared with children who are good readers, while there are no group differences in their responses to clicks (J Neurosci 2013;33[8]:3500-3504).

Because children with APD often have difficulty understanding speech in noise, it might make sense to evaluate their processing of such speech using an objective method free from the language, memory, and attention demands that can complicate behavioral APD testing.

We and our coauthors recorded responses to the speech syllable /da/ (first 80 ms) is temporally aligned so that the onset and peaks match the responses in the bottom two panels. Individual responses are displayed for a 10-year-old boy with a good HINT score in quiet (pink) and noise (red), middle panel, and for a 9-year-old boy with a poor HINT score in quiet (gray) and noise (black), bottom panel. The arrows illustrate the delay in noise peaks seen in the responses of the child with the poor score.

**Toward a Biologic Index of APD**

By Nina Kraus, PhD, & Samira Anderson, AuD, PhD

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**Top panel:** The stimulus waveform of the syllable /da/ (first 80 ms) is temporally aligned so that the onset and peaks match the responses in the bottom two panels. Individual responses are displayed for a 10-year-old boy with a good HINT score in quiet (pink) and noise (red), middle panel, and for a 9-year-old boy with a poor HINT score in quiet (gray) and noise (black), bottom panel. The arrows illustrate the delay in noise peaks seen in the responses of the child with the poor score.

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**Dr. Kraus, left, is professor of auditory neuroscience at Northwestern University, investigating the neurobiology underlying speech and music perception and learning-associated brain plasticity. Dr. Anderson is an alumna of Dr. Kraus’s Auditory Neuroscience Laboratory and assistant professor in the University of Maryland Department of Hearing & Speech Sciences, where she is studying the effects of hearing loss and aging on neural processing in older adults.**