



THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY SCREENING

Professionals can use a variety of easy and quick screeners in math and reading and provide helpful strategies and interventions to support struggling learners. For many years, advocates—particularly parents—have pushed for up-to-date information about children’s progress, feedback about how well they’re performing across subject areas, and insight as to whether they’re mastering skills needed for continued progress. Early screening offers answers to these questions, as well as pointing to characteristics that might identify risk for underlying disorders of learning and attention.

Universal screening involves collecting performance data on all students in a given setting (e.g., a classroom) to determine if learning is on track in particular areas, such as reading or math. This type of screening allows parents, educators, and pediatricians to easily see which children are meeting expectations and which may need additional instruction or targeted intervention and support. Once screening takes place, a plan can be implemented to ensure that the needs of children found to be at risk can be addressed so they don’t fall further behind. Early screening is especially beneficial for students who did not attend pre-K programs, who are entering inclusive classroom settings after having received early intervention services, or who are from historically marginalized communities and may be entering school with developmental skills already lagging behind those of their peers.

The following chart provides clarification about the differences between screening and other related terms. As you’ll see, each serves a different purpose, but all are connected in some important ways.

Tool or approach used to collect student data	Definition	Who is involved?	What is measured?	How much time does it take?	Is it diagnostic?
Screening	An approach to quickly understanding how well one or more students in a given setting are demonstrating knowledge and skill mastery in particular areas of learning.	Any number of students (If an entire class or grade, it's referred to as "universal screening.")	Specific skills in domains such as reading or math	Typically just a few minutes	No
Statewide Standardized Assessments	An approach to gather general information about student progress across all schools throughout the state as required under federal law. Most states create their own state assessment tools, so it's not possible to compare progress across different locations. The results of these assessments can point to learning across content areas and to schools and student groups warranting attention. They do not yield specific-enough data to use in targeting instruction for individual students.	All students (Some students with significant cognitive disabilities may be exempt.)	A broad sample of how students perform in specific subject areas	Typically many hours over multiple days	No
Formative Assessment	An approach that offers ongoing and just-in-time feedback to students and educators during the course of instruction and learning. Barriers to learning can be identified quickly and adjustments made without concern over points or grades, as these types of activities are generally "low stakes" (not graded).	All students	How well students are learning and how well educators are providing effective instruction	Varies; usually only a few minutes (but repeated over time)	No
Summative Assessment	An approach that gathers information about student learning at the end of an instructional unit. These types of activities are often "high stakes" because they result in the assignment of some value (e.g., grade, pass/fail, credit).	All students	How well individual students perform against some standard or benchmark	Varies; could be an hour or more, or over a few days or weeks	No
Informal Assessment	An approach that teachers use every day to evaluate the ongoing progress of individual students. Activities might include questionnaires, projects, writing samples, and teacher-made tests and quizzes.	All students	How well students are learning and how well educators are providing effective instruction	Minutes or longer	No

Progress Monitoring	An approach used to gather information and assess students' academic and/or behavioral performance.	Individual students or groups of students (e.g., entire classroom or grade)	The quantity of information being taught and the rate of learning or improvement being made toward goals (e.g., how well students are responding to instruction)	Varies; usually only a few minutes (but repeated over time)	No
Diagnostic Assessment	An approach that involves the use of standardized instruments that provide comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data about an individual student.	Individual students who are struggling with specific skills despite having received high-quality classroom instruction	A student's knowledge or skills in reading, math, attention, or other areas critical for school success	Minutes to hours, depending on the assessment	No
Comprehensive Evaluation	An approach that uses a variety of tools and measures to gather functional, developmental, and academic information and help determine a student's eligibility to receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Information from parents and others as appropriate (e.g., physicians, therapists, coaches) is a critical and highly valued component of any evaluation process.	Individual students who are struggling to learn in one or more areas despite high-quality instruction, and for whom special education services may be warranted	A comprehensive sampling of a student's knowledge and skills across a range of domains that are foundational to functioning in academic and social settings	Hours, and likely consisting of multiple data points and assessments over the course of days or weeks	No

There are three major benefits of early screening:

Academic: Early screening can lead to timely recognition of learning difficulties and characteristics that might signal a risk for disorder of learning and/or attention. Neuroplasticity in young children offers windows of opportunity in virtually every aspect of learning because of the extent to which their brains are malleable (changeable and developing). In young children, brain networks for information processing are still being formed, which means that early experiences, and interventions, can have a greater impact on students when they are young.¹ Early screening can result in children receiving extra help sooner and prevent them from falling behind.

Social and emotional: Early screening may prevent children from being inappropriately identified as having a learning disability or incorrectly being classified as needing special education services and

1. Simmons, D., Coyne, M., Kwok, O., McDonagh, S., Harn, B., & Kame'enui, E. (2008). Indexing response to intervention: A longitudinal study of reading risk from kindergarten through third grade. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 41*(2), 158–173.

supports. Children whose needs are identified and addressed early might make sufficient progress to mitigate the need for special education services. Unfortunately, there is still a stigma associated with being identified as having a learning disability, which can lead to higher rates of bullying, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.² The identification rate of students with specific learning disabilities is trending downward. Some speculate that this is because of an increased investment in Head Start and high-quality preschool programs, which often provide evidence-based interventions early in a child's academic career.³

Economic: The cost of screening young children for learning disabilities has been estimated to range from \$3–\$20 per pupil. However, the benefits of early screening far outweigh its costs.⁴ Effective early screening can lead to large economic benefits, given the high costs associated with remediation and the treatment of psychological or medical and psychiatric problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic conditions related to academic stress) that can result from failing to address students' needs early. In addition, students who struggle academically or behaviorally have higher rates of unemployment and are at risk of involvement with the criminal justice system later on in life. Negative outcomes like these are costly for society. One study found that early interventions can lead to as much as a \$31 return on investment for every \$1 spent.⁵ If screening allows educators to address students' needs earlier, students can remain on a trajectory toward successful grade promotion, high school graduation, college attendance, and/or gainful employment.

Early Screening Resources

- [Best Practices in Universal Screening \(National Center on Improving Literacy\)](#)
- [Academic Screening Tools Chart \(American Institutes for Research\)](#)
- [Gaab Lab Early Literacy Assessment Screeners](#)
- [Screening, Assessment, and Evaluation \(Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center\)](#)
- [Universal Screening \(Center on Response to Intervention\)](#)

2. Horowitz, S., Rawe, J., & Whittaker, M. (2017). The state of learning disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5. National Center for Learning Disabilities.

3. Ibid.

4. Gaab, N. (2017, February). It's a myth that young children cannot be screened for dyslexia! International Dyslexia Association. <https://dyslexiaida.org/its-a-myth-that-young-children-cannot-be-screened-for-dyslexia/>

5. Gross, J. The long term costs of literacy difficulties (2nd ed). Every Child a Chance Trust. 2009. p. 5.

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For more information, visit www.nclld.org or contact NCLD via email: info@nclld.org

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