

Better, Simpler Assessment Challenge

Good assessment and screening tools are essential to effective Head Start and other early childhood programs. To improve outcomes for Head Start children, the National Head Start Association seeks ways to make early childhood assessment tools better and simpler, meaning more useful, less burdensome, more actionable, and more affordable.

This overview document discusses the characteristics of assessment tools that would be most valuable to users. NHSA encourages current vendors to find ways to improve, continually, the performance of their assessment tools on all of these dimensions, and invites new vendors to understand the need and help find ways to meet it.

A number of characteristics make assessment tools more or less useful. These include:

Features to maximize:	
Validity	The degree to which a tool has the right metrics to accurately measure both what it claims to measure and what is useful, important, and relevant to measure to gauge child progress and needs
Objectivity	The degree to which an assessment is not subjective, meaning it provides similar results regardless of who does the assessing
Reliability	The degree to which the results of an assessment are consistent under different test conditions, be it different examiners carrying out the test or the test being carried out at a different time or place
Ease of use	The degree to which a tool is simple to be trained to use and the simplicity of administering the assessment itself.
Accessibility	The degree to which information is easy to find and access, including generating no- or low-cost reports that identify patterns at all levels from the individual child on up to and across classrooms and beyond and noting exceptions, warnings, and patterns/relationships/outliers
Timeliness	The degree to which information and reports are available immediately
Frequency	The degree to which an assessment allows for frequent feedback on children’s development, including updating near- and long-term goals and identifying time-linked patterns and relationships
Interoperability	The degree to which data can connect with other data or systems
Protection	The degree to which data in the tool protects the subject’s privacy in accordance with well-established, vetted governance rules while not prohibiting analysis that could support the subject
Features to Minimize:	
Time	The amount of time required of children and assessment administrators to conduct the assessment
Cost	The monetary cost of an assessment
Stress	The extent to which an assessment may be the source of stress for the child being assessed or the administrator conducting it

Trade-offs across these attributes are inevitable. While validity, objectivity, reliability, and privacy are of paramount concern, Head Start providers need assessment tools that continually improve on all of these quality dimensions over time.