

# Novel software assesses phonological awareness

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The ATLAS program—the first test of its kind for children with speech and/or language impairment—can help parents, early childhood teachers and paraeducators more accurately measure progress for children with a range of skill levels. Credit: Royalty-free via Pxhere

Understanding sounds in language is a critical building block for child literacy, yet this skill is often overlooked. Researchers from Michigan State University have developed a new software tool to assess children's phonological awareness—or, how they process the sound structure of words.

The ATLAS, or Access to Literacy Assessment System, program—the first test of its kind for [children](#) with speech and/or [language](#) impairment—can help parents, early childhood teachers and paraeducators more accurately measure progress for children with a range of skill levels.

Research conducted by the MSU ATLAS team, published in the journal *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, demonstrated that the software was effective when tested with over 1,100 children between the ages of 3 and 7—both with and without speech and language impairments.

"Phonological awareness is one of the strongest predictors of literacy skill development later in life," said Lori Skibbe, professor of human development and [family studies](#) at MSU and study lead author. "It can include rhyming, recognizing how sounds go together to make words and understanding how words can be broken apart into sounds."

Skibbe explained that the software, available free of charge, is adaptive, which means that test items are unique for each child. Children can take the test without speaking, and the test is shorter than many others in the field. ATLAS is also helpful for many children with disabilities, including those with speech and/or language impairment.

"For children with a primary speech and/or [language impairment](#), meeting educational literacy goals can be difficult," Skibbe said.

"However, the ATLAS software allows children to demonstrate what they know, even if they struggle to answer questions verbally. This ensures their skills are accurately assessed, and that they receive the right support to keep them on track to meet literacy milestones."

**More information:** Lori E. Skibbe et al, *The Access to Literacy Assessment System for Phonological Awareness: An Adaptive Measure*

of Phonological Awareness Appropriate for Children With Speech and/or Language Impairment, *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools* (2020). [DOI: 10.1044/2020\\_LSHSS-19-00006](https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_LSHSS-19-00006)

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