



Quality: What It Looks Like

The quality of a child's future depends on the quality of caregiving in the first five years. This is particularly true of our most at-risk children. Benefits that can accrue from a first-rate early learning experience come only if the setting is safe, healthy, stimulating, thoughtful, organized and—perhaps most important—led by well-trained, attentive teachers. Here's what to look for in a successful early learning program.

What you want to see:

Educated, attentive, and engaged teachers and staff

- Teachers with four-year degrees and specific training in early childhood education.
- No more than eight infants and toddlers and no more than 20 preschoolers in a classroom.
- Teacher-to-child ratios of 1:3 for infants and 1:10 for preschoolers.
- Teachers who crouch to eye level to speak to children.
- Teachers who hold, cuddle, show affection, and speak directly to infants and toddlers.
- Families and teachers exchanging information about the child's development and learning progress.

A safe, healthy, and child-friendly environment

- A room well-equipped with sufficient and appropriate materials and toys.
- Classrooms in which materials and activities are organized logically and placed at eye level for the children.
- Materials and toys accessible to children in an orderly display.
- Centers that encourage safe, outdoor playtime.
- Frequent hand-washing by children and adults.
- Children offered breakfast, lunch, and a time to nap.
- Visitors welcomed with appropriate parental consent.

Stimulating activities and appropriately structured routines

- Children receiving a variety of stimuli in their daily routine using indoor and outdoor spaces and age-appropriate language, literacy, math, science, art, music, movement, and dramatic play experiences.
- Children participating with teachers and each other in individual, small-group, and large-group activities.
- Children who are engaged in their activities.
- Preschoolers who are allowed to play independently.

What you don't want to see:

Inattentive, overwhelmed, or unengaged staff

- Unengaged teachers sitting on the side of the classroom not participating with children.
- Shouting, swearing, or other displays of hostile discipline.
- Infants and toddlers crying without being soothed and supported.
- Teachers speaking to children only to control or direct behavior.
- Teachers who are unresponsive to children's needs or attempts to communicate.
- Children being asked closed-ended ("Yes or No") questions instead of "how" and "why" questions.

An unsafe, unhealthy, or uninspiring environment

- Small, cramped centers or homes without designated appropriate spaces for different ages.
- A center or home that smells or looks unclean, or has visible safety risks.
- Use of television or video to occupy children.
- Children easily distracted or frightened by visiting strangers.
- Disorganized or inaccessible play centers.
- Insufficient, damaged, or inappropriate materials or toys.

Activities and routines that are too chaotic or inflexible

- Children wandering aimlessly, left unsupervised, or displaying unchecked aggression.
- Children restrained in car seats or in high chairs at times other than meal time.
- Children spending a lot of time waiting for turns or standing in lines.
- Children expected to sit at desks or perform highly structured tasks (worksheets), or other forms of age-inappropriate expectations.
- Lack of children's self-directed creative/imaginative play.



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Identifying Quality Programs

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

Similar to rating systems for restaurants and hotels, a QRIS awards quality ratings to early learning programs that meet a set of defined program standards.

A QRIS should have five elements:

- 1.** Standards ranging from basic licensing to higher quality standards.
- 2.** Accountability measures and monitoring processes used to determine how well programs meet standards and to assign ratings.
- 3.** Program and practitioner outreach and support, such as training, mentoring, and technical assistance.
- 4.** Funding incentives awarded to programs when quality levels are achieved.
- 5.** Parent education efforts. Most QRIS award easily recognizable symbols, such as stars, to programs to indicate the levels of quality and to inform and educate parents.

Currently, 19 States (CO, DE, DC, IN, IA, KY, LA, ME, MD, MS, MT, NH, NM, NC, OH, OK, PA, TN, and VT) have a statewide QRIS with all five elements.

Source: National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center

Program Accreditation

Accreditation is a voluntary process designed to improve the quality of early learning programs. Accreditation systems require programs to meet defined standards and engage in extensive self-study and validation by outside professionals to verify that quality standards are met. Research has demonstrated that accreditation positively affects program quality, including benefits to children, families, and staff. Several organizations accredit early learning programs; the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is an example of one that is highly regarded as an indicator of quality programs.

Program Quality Assessments

A range of assessment tools can evaluate an early learning program using observations of practice and the environment, and surveys or interviews of teachers or parents. Some commonly used assessments include:

- The *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)*, an observational tool that measures the quality of teacher-child interactions in pre-kindergarten classrooms.
- The *Environmental Rating Scales*, which are available for infant and toddler settings (ITERS), pre-school settings (ECERS), family child care settings (FCCERS), and school-age programs (SACERS). They evaluate physical environment, basic care, curriculum, interaction, schedule and program structure, and parent and staff education.

Child Assessments

Parents, providers, and policymakers struggle to balance the need for measures of children's development and learning with concerns about the proper role of assessment when dealing with very young children. When chosen appropriately, child assessments can provide information that helps programs continuously improve. Common tools include:

- *Bayley Scales of Infant and Toddler Development*, which measures physical, motor, sensory, and cognitive development in babies and young children.
- *Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA)*, a tool to measure social-emotional strengths and behavioral concerns.
- *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT)*, which measures comprehension of English vocabulary.
- *Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)*, measures used to regularly monitor the development of pre-reading and early reading skills.
- *Woodcock-Johnson*, an assessment of cognitive and language abilities.
- *Bracken Basic Concept Scale*, which determines a child's school readiness and knowledge of English-language verbal concepts.
- *Work Sampling System*, an assessment that uses ongoing teacher observations to document children's skills, knowledge, behavior, and accomplishments.

