

It's Assessment Time Again?

Some Ideas to Learn the Most From Assessments

BY CARA MURDOCH AND SHERRY ROCHA

Assessments are used in every part of our environment. Doctors use them to see how a patient is doing. Schools use them to evaluate the progress of students. Companies use assessments to make sure their products work and are safe. Early childhood programs also use assessments, but when it's time for assessments at early childhood programs, some become nervous and worried. Here are ways to ease those worries.

Information on the [Environment Rating Scales Institute](#) (ERSI) website reminds us, "Children thrive when they are safe, supported, and engaged at school."

Early childhood program administrators and leaders can use formal and informal assessments to track how their program is doing and where it shines the most. It is important to make sure best practices for teaching and program administration are used to benefit children and families in programs.

Assessments also give the leaders of programs data to use in plotting the progress and achievements of a program. Administrators, program funders, and policymakers can use this data to show continuous improvement and [quality for children](#) who attend the program.

Leaders can use assessment tools in many ways. Leaders or directors can and should do self-assessments to give them a baseline or starting place to plan ongoing improvements. It is also advisable to have families regularly complete assessments that gather their ideas about how a program is doing. Selecting and reading an assessment scale to complete a self-assessment allows a leader to become familiar with what the scale requires.

INFORMAL ASSESSMENTS

Here are some things for program administrators and teachers to consider as they begin a self-assessment:

- Ensure that classrooms have materials suited to the ages of the children enrolled.
- Provide children with opportunities to explore things they are interested in indoors and outdoors.
- Make sure that children feel safe in their environments.
- Observe specific items in classrooms:
 - How is the classroom organized to be the best environment for children?
 - Can teachers see children easily to supervise and assist them?
 - Do staff check on and interact with children who play alone?

- Is the room cheery and inviting so children feel free to engage with materials?
- Encourage teachers to talk so children hear and use a considerable amount of language in each classroom. Classrooms where language is used consistently tend to have few problems.
 - Are teachers talking with the children throughout the day, including during diapering, toileting, and meals?
 - Do teachers use language to discuss a variety of topics, not just to give directions or manage behaviors?
 - Are authentic back-and-forth conversations between staff and children occurring?
 - Do you hear teachers asking “how” or “why” questions, prompting children to think more deeply about things?
 - Are the teachers encouraging children as they navigate the classroom?

FORMAL ASSESSMENTS

[ERSI scales](#) were developed to measure the process quality of a program and were created using research-based knowledge about what high quality entails. The scales look at the developmental levels of the early childhood years, including infant/toddler, preschool, and school age. They also look at the quality of in-home family child care.

Many states use the ERSI scales for accountability in their [quality recognition and improvement systems](#). Early childhood programs or family child care home providers can usually choose to participate in their [state’s quality recognition](#) and improvement program. They often work toward a tiered quality level, demonstrating the program’s dedication to continuous [quality improvement](#).

Many states use assessors trained to maintain reliability in the selected scales to administer classroom and program assessments for state quality recognition and improvement systems. Assessments for classrooms measure what an assessor observes or experiences, often during a three-hour period of the classroom day. It is a snapshot of a portion of a day. An assessor’s job is to be a scientist and capture all the data regarding what happened during that snapshot.

The assessor who comes to your program is your ally. They will provide information after taking time to observe carefully. Feedback is given not just in the scores but in reports that are generated after an observation.

Here are some things for program administrators and teachers to consider as they prepare for a formal assessment:

- Make sure to include all staff in the preparations. Start early in the process so that ideas teachers want to implement in their classrooms become established habits. Assessors should see a typical day when they arrive.
- Think about what the program or providers want to gain from the improvement and assessment process.
- Talk with staff and set goals for the future.

- Read any available materials to understand what the assessment scale or tool requires. Act on things that are achievable. Parent assessments can help you see the full picture.

Remember the words of Mark Twain: “Continuous improvement is better than delayed perfection.”

Here are resources to explore further:

- What’s happening in state QRIS systems? <https://qualitycompendium.org/view-state-profiles>
- What is quality improvement and why does it matter? <https://buildinitiative.org/work/quality-improvement/>
- Why do high-quality experiences influence children and families? <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/childrens-learning-and-development-benefits-high-quality-early-care-and-education>

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