



SECTION III
FEATURES OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS
THAT PROMOTE COGNITIVE AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT



SECTION III. FEATURES OF HIGH-QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS THAT PROMOTE COGNITIVE AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

This section of the document addresses six features of early childhood programs related to cognitive growth and language development: parental involvement, learning environment, pedagogy, curricula, assessment, and staff qualifications. Each feature begins with a summary of salient findings from research followed by a statement of the challenges to be faced for quality implementation. A series of quality indicator statements describes what an observer could look for to determine whether the program is on the track of producing long term meaningful outcomes for children. Rate your preschool program on each of the indicators using the five-point scale that ranges from “Not at all Descriptive of our Program” to “Very Descriptive of our Program.” The final section of this document includes the indicator statements in instrument format for use in self-assessments.

The statements in the sections that follow describe hallmarks of good practice that have widespread support, but they are not intended to serve as a complete list of ideal program qualities. The statements can be used to help schools set benchmarks for improving the quality of preschool services. The quality indicators in this section are derived from the extensive work done in recent years by federal agencies, state departments of education, academics, and professional associations. Major sources include:

The National Research Council's Eager to Learn, The National Reading Panel Report on Teaching Children to Read, and Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children

*National Association for the Education of Young Children
National Association of Early Childhood Specialists*

The standards and guidelines for early childhood developed by several states, including California, Connecticut, New York, and Texas.

See endnotes and resource section for more information.



A. QUALITY OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

From the research:

- Family variables are powerful predictors of children’s subsequent language development and academic performance. Parental beliefs and attitudes about literacy and reading affect children’s literacy development. Parents report that they feel less able to positively impact their children’s intellectual development than any other area of child development.¹¹
- Families contribute to children’s literacy and school-related competence directly by engaging in language-rich verbal exchanges with the child, and in indirect ways, by providing reading and writing materials, and serving as role models in the regular use and enjoyment of reading and writing in everyday life. Gains in children’s skills are associated with parents’ responsiveness during story reading.¹²
- Children with multiple risk factors, including poverty, are less likely than others to engage in literacy activities frequently with their families.¹³

The challenge for programs:

Many professionals have never had training in parental involvement strategies. Certainly, many parents are not aware of the importance of their roles in supporting children’s learning, nor have they been exposed to techniques for doing so. In general, the field of parenting education is less well developed than other fields. Relationship-building with parents can be especially challenging for staff when families are from cultural, language, or income and social groups that differ from their own backgrounds. Engaging parents who have limited literacy skills poses both a challenge and opportunity. Schools might initiate or link with a family literacy program specifically designed to develop parents’ literacy skills, while supporting involvement with their children’s literacy development. It is important for all schools to have clear expectations for parents as well as for their own roles in the home-school relationship.

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT: LOOK FOR...

DEVELOPMENT OF HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

- All parents believe that their child’s teacher respects their views and express trust in the teacher. Parents are welcome visitors to the program at any time.
- A system is in place for teacher-parent communication of day-to-day happenings that may affect children. Staff regularly provides information to parents about how their children are progressing and does so formally through conferences several times a year.
- The school has explicit expectations for the parent’s role. Staff provides information to all parents about their roles in family-school relationships, the schedule and school calendar, the meaning of progress reports and school forms, and so forth.
- All parents have opportunities for input into program procedures and the plans for meeting their child’s needs.

HOME LITERACY ENVIRONMENT AND PARENT-CHILD INTERACTIONS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

- Staff routinely provides books and other literacy materials for use in the home environment. Staff encourages parent-child book reading in a variety of ways. Staff demonstrates ways to read with children.
- Staff makes home visits for instructional purposes as appropriate.
- During parent-teacher conferences, staff asks parents for their observations about their child’s language and literacy development. Staff uses the knowledge in ongoing assessment and planning.
- The program makes available opportunities for parents to extend their own literacy learning, directly or through referrals.

COMPETENCE IN WORKING WITH DIVERSE PARENT POPULATIONS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

- Staff has detailed knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live. Staff understands and respects the values and traditions of culturally diverse families.
- Staff makes appropriate accommodations for parents with special needs, e.g., oral presentations of written material, visits to the home.
- Staff makes arrangements for communicating with parents in their preferred language.

B. QUALITY OF LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

From the research:

- Class size and adult-child ratios are related to learning outcomes. Low ratios allow more interaction and individualization. Small group size encourages more extended language opportunities, child-initiated learning, and exploration and problem solving.
- Children learn best when their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically safe and secure. Children need to know that school is a safe place where adults will protect them.¹⁵
- A significant part of the variation in performance in Head Start is related to the quality of classroom environments. Children’s performance is higher if the teacher encourages independence, and classes have varied and appropriate schedules, are well-equipped, and provide rich language learning opportunities.¹⁶

The challenge for programs:

Most early childhood educators would agree that learning environments strongly influence what is learned and how it is learned. Unfortunately, when the rush to provide services to increased numbers of preschoolers compromises the quality of the learning environment, desired results might not be achieved. The goal is to create an environment that conveys messages such as these to children: *This is a safe and comfortable place. I belong here and I am valued. I know what I’m expected to do.*¹⁷

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: LOOK FOR...

CLASS SIZE AND TEACHER-STUDENT RATIOS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- The number of adults in the classroom and the adult-child ratio follow state-recommended guidelines for age groups. Ratios and grouping are adequate so that each child is known well by at least one adult.
- Staff members have assigned responsibility for a particular group of children. Programs maintain stable staff relationships, for example, keeping the same staff with children over several years.
- Space is arranged so that children can work individually, in small groups, and as a whole group.

SAFE, SECURE CLASSROOMS, SCHOOLS, AND OTHER LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- The space, including outdoor play areas, is clean, well-lighted and ventilated and in good repair.
- Room arrangements, schedules, and daily expectations follow consistent routines that are known to children. Transitions are smooth, purposeful, and not rushed.
- There is at least one adult who speaks the home language of most children.
- Adults are respectful toward children.
- Adults involve children in the development of clear and consistent rules. Adults encourage positive social behavior, e.g., turn taking, respecting others’ feelings, and model how to solve problems and resolve differences.

RICH LITERACY ENVIRONMENT

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- Arrangements and selection of materials engage children’s interest in exploration. Children’s work and products are displayed in the classroom.
- The early childhood classroom has many and varied books, which are displayed attractively and are accessible to children. Writing materials are available in many different parts of the classroom.
- The classroom contains alphabet materials, including posted letters, labels on objects in the environment, alphabet manipulatives, and alphabet books.
- At least some reading materials have been selected for their connections to children’s linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- Children have access to a wide range of materials useful for creative expression, e.g., art materials, dramatic play props.

ACCOMMODATION OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- Staff includes all children in activities and events, e.g., games and sports. Adaptations are made in activities to facilitate participation by all children, and interventions for children with disabilities or other special needs maximize their participation and membership in the group.
- Physical space and materials are adapted to promote engagement, interaction, play and learning. Adaptations encourage children to initiate learning and do not always depend on adults.

C. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY

*From the research:*¹⁸

- A supportive early childhood context can strengthen young children’s learning in all domains, e.g., cognition and language, physical and motor development, emotional and social development, and cultural and aesthetic development.
- Children are better prepared for school when early childhood programs expose them to a variety of classroom structures, thought processes, and discourse patterns.
- Children construct knowledge actively, integrating new concepts into existing understandings. Teaching and learning are most effective when they begin with and build on children’s existing understandings.
- Approaches that encourage children to reflect, predict, question, and hypothesize allow children to learn more deliberately.

The challenge for programs:

Children arrive at preschool with very different developmental, social, and cultural experiences, resulting in great variations in their readiness for the setting. Because individual differences among children have a strong influence on growth and development, no single “lock-stepped” approach to teaching is useful. Working with children who represent a wide range of development requires well-trained staff. Early childhood programs must explicitly address the development of the whole child because learning in one domain of development often reinforces or deepens learning in another area of development. Some curricular activities such as arts, music, and dramatic play are especially productive for developing language and literacy concepts.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY IN PEDAGOGY: LOOK FOR...

VARIETY OF DOMAINS AND STRUCTURES

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

- The early childhood program has the explicit goal of supporting all domains of development for all children.
- Children’s daily schedules include a mix of whole class, small group, and individual interaction with teachers.

INDIVIDUALIZATION

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

- Staff spends time each day observing children, including during play. Staff records observations for use in planning, and discusses observations of progress to match activities to the child's level of development.
- Each day includes some opportunities for child-initiated learning activities along with teacher-structured activities.

LEARNING HOW TO THINK

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

- During all types of activities, staff frequently uses open-ended questions with all children to develop children's thinking.
- Staff conducts and facilitates conversations among children on a daily basis, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to participate in taking turns during conversations.
- Each day staff provides opportunities for children to ask questions and explore responses, reason and problem-solve, and use both deliberate and trial and error approaches for investigations. Staff encourages all children to participate in hands-on activities and interact with peers and adults about their observations.

D. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULA

From the research:

- Research does not identify any one best curriculum for preschool-age children to prepare them for school. But it is clear that there are some important ingredients, including explicit curricular goals, planned learning experiences in all curricular areas, and extensive language and literacy development.¹⁹
- Children learn from interactions with the physical and natural environment and also learn from each other. Children learn through play and active exploration of the environment.²⁰
- Teaching children phonemic awareness significantly improves reading. Vocabulary should be taught both directly and indirectly, e.g., through story reading or listening. Repetition and multiple exposure is important for vocabulary learning.²¹

The challenge for programs:

Early childhood programs need to balance consistent curricular guidance that ensures that all children have an opportunity to attain desired outcomes with the flexibility that staff needs to meet the wide-ranging needs of children. The nature of learning should inform the practice of teaching. Learning activities that take a child just beyond his or her existing knowledge and skill level are optimal for educational development. Narrowly focused curricula that emphasize only basic skills or drills on content have little meaning to children and should be avoided.

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR CURRICULA: LOOK FOR...

PLANNING

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE		VERY DESCRIPTIVE		
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff members in the early childhood program are able to describe the theoretical base from which the program operates.
- The early childhood program has identified foundational concepts and specific skills that all children should learn. Curriculum content is designed to achieve long range goals for children. The early childhood curricular expectations are linked to elementary school standards.
- The curriculum allows for children to work at different levels on different activities. Children are not expected to all do the same thing at the same time.
- The curriculum is organized within conceptual frameworks such as projects, units, and themes in order to provide context for abstract concepts.

LANGUAGE FOUNDATIONS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE		VERY DESCRIPTIVE		
1	2	3	4	5

- Adults engage throughout the day in meaningful conversations with children, including conversations initiated by children. Adult speech is pleasant in tone, varied in complexity, and understood by children.
- Vocabulary development is part of all learning activities. Staff takes advantage of routines, informal daily activities, and play opportunities to point out new words in context, and adults expand upon children's speech.
- Staff members exhibit respect for the home language of children. Staff may use the the language in some daily conversations and include stories and materials in the home language.

EMERGENT LITERACY FOUNDATIONS FOR READING

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- Staff explicitly teaches phonological awareness skills through rhyming, categorization of sounds, and identification of syllables. On a daily basis, staff uses rhyming, poetry, music, and word play with sound clusters to build sensitivity to sounds and awareness of phonemic patterns.
- Staff frequently makes explicit connections between speech and print, e.g., pointing out letters of the alphabet associated with sounds and speech units and taking dictation from children.
- Staff explicitly teaches skills associated with conventions of print and literacy, e.g., book handling, following print on a page.
- Adult-child shared book reading of quality children’s literature occurs every day. During story reading and telling, instructional approaches are used frequently to engage children in dialogue about the story and telling the story.
- Teachers encourage children every day to talk about their experiences and to represent their ideas in stories and pictures.
- Children are encouraged to write using their own spellings of words to link sounds with letters.

MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE FOUNDATIONS FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- Staff encourages direct, first hand, interactive experiences with natural and manipulative materials. The real world is the subject of learning activities. Children have the opportunity to develop concepts about the natural world, including the basic needs of living things, the differences and similarities among objects and organisms, the materials things are made of, and cycles and patterns of change.
- Staff develops children’s understanding of key vocabulary associated with sequencing, comparisons and sorting, spatial relationships, and temporal relationships.
- Children have the opportunities to learn the functions and properties of objects, and classify and group materials.
- Staff provides instruction and practice in recognizing numerals, counting objects, describing and naming shapes, reproducing and extending simple patterns, using basic measurement tools, and collecting and organizing information.
- Staff helps children develop simple investigations that involve asking questions, making observations, gathering information, drawing conclusions, and communicating findings.

E. QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STAFF

*From the research:*²²

- A defining feature of a supportive environment is a responsive and responsible adult who nurtures children’s dispositions to learn. The quality of early teacher-child relationships affects social competence and school achievement.
- Teachers’ professional backgrounds are related to the types of interactions with children that support cognitive and language development. When the teaching staff knows how to observe children’s approaches to learning, they are able to create challenging learning experiences that are within the reach of the child, and as a result, extend the child’s competence.
- Stability and consistency of relationships between adults and children are important for learning. Building close relationships depends upon stability; therefore, turnover of staff is disruptive for children’s learning.

The challenge for programs:

In many areas, there is a shortage of qualified early childhood staff so maintaining staff, with expertise and experience requires ongoing attention. Because individualized support for children is critical, schools need to create professional working conditions that support continuous learning, enabling teachers to learn more about the children in their care and reflect on the effectiveness of teaching practices.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY OF STAFF: LOOK FOR...

BACKGROUND OF STAFF

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- Early childhood teachers have at least baccalaureate degrees, ideally with specialization in early childhood education. At a minimum, early childhood instructional assistants are high school graduates or have equivalent credentials and have been trained in early childhood education.
- Early childhood teachers and instructional assistants have or are working towards appropriate state certification for early childhood.
- At least some members of the staff speak the home language of the majority of the children.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- All early childhood staff members (teachers and instructional assistants) have training in child development; child observation and assessment; early literacy and language acquisition, including second language acquisition; curricula, environments and materials for young children; parental involvement; cultural diversity and special needs; and working with other staff.
- At least weekly, staff has an opportunity to discuss their observations of children’s development and seek guidance for instructional approaches.

PROFESSIONAL WORKING CONDITIONS

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE	
1	2	3	4	5		

- During the school day, staff spends little time on tasks that do not involve children’s learning.
- Early childhood staff members receive supervision from an early childhood specialist with at least a Masters degree in early childhood education.

F. QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

From the research:

- Assessment serves several purposes in early childhood: planning instruction and monitoring progress, communicating progress to parents, identifying children in need of special services or intervention, and evaluating how well the program is meeting its goals.²³
- There are long-term negative consequences associated with deferring identification of and planning interventions for children who need additional support for language and literacy development.²⁴
- Assessment in early childhood is currently in a state of flux and the field is continuing to develop.²⁵

The challenge for programs:

Assessment is inseparable from effective instruction; teachers daily guide learning based on their assessments of each child’s development. A wide variety of approaches and instruments is appropriate for instructional assessment to provide additional support in areas of need. Those same instruments may not be appropriate for higher stakes assessments of preschool children, for example, placement decisions. Much more care needs to be employed when assessment is used for purposes external to the classroom, e.g., program evaluation and accountability. Schools certainly need to assess the effectiveness of preschool programs in terms of their outcomes for children, but the data should always be collected and reported in ways that bring benefits to children rather than delaying services. Because the course of development in the preschool years is uneven and sporadic, assessment results that reflect only a single point in time can easily misrepresent children’s learning.

INDICATORS OF QUALITY OF ASSESSMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: LOOK FOR...

GUIDANCE FOR INSTRUCTION

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

variety of assessment procedures that are embedded in instruction on an ongoing basis, including observation, performance assessment, work samples and interviews.

- Teachers use a
- Records of assessments document what children know as well as what they do not yet know. Teacher records show which children are not making adequate progress in order to ensure that attention is paid to skill development.

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE					VERY DESCRIPTIVE
1	2	3	4	5	

IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS FOR SPECIAL SERVICES AND INTERVENTIONS

VICES AND INTERVENTIONS

- The program has a process in place for screening and referring children for special education and other services. The process includes provisions for informing parents of the referral in advance, along with their associated rights. Parents may remain with the child during assessments.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

NOT AT ALL DESCRIPTIVE		VERY DESCRIPTIVE		
1	2	3	4	5

- Staff and parents meet to develop instructional and other goals for children.
- Staff and parents participate in a formal annual review to determine the program's effectiveness in meeting the needs of children and families.
- The annual review includes an assessment of the overall context, including staff turnover, and parental satisfaction.
- The annual review of the program includes performance data about children collected by teachers. Multiple indicators of progress are included to assess program effectiveness in meeting instructional goals.
- Staff make recommendations for program improvement based upon findings in the annual review.

SUMMARY

If the indicators listed in the six features above **are** descriptive of your current preschool program, then you are well on the way to providing experiences for young children that will produce strong outcomes. The next section lists specific outcomes for language development, enabling you to determine whether children in your preschool program are attaining the skills that are important foundations for school success.

If your program **did not** rate well on some indicators, now is the time to take stock and develop an action plan that answers these questions:

- Where do we want to be in a year? What changes are most important? What goals are reasonable?
- What strategies, capacities, and resources do we need to achieve those goals?