

Introduction to the Harms, Clifford and Cryer Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales

Introduction

Research Use

The Environment Rating Scales in Program Improvement

Related Work

There are four environment rating scales, each designed for a different segment of the early childhood field.

- Each one of the scales has items to evaluate: *Physical Environment; Basic Care; Curriculum; Interaction; Schedule and Program Structure; and Parent and Staff Education.*
- The scales are suitable for use in evaluating inclusive and culturally diverse programs.
- The scales have proven reliability and validity.

Our scales are designed to assess process quality in an early childhood or school age care group. Process quality consists of the various interactions that go on in a classroom between staff and children, staff, parents, and other adults, among the children themselves, and the interactions children have with the many materials and activities in the environment, as well as those features, such as space, schedule and materials that support these interactions. Process quality is assessed primarily through observation and has been found to be more predictive of child outcomes than structural indicators such as staff to child ratio, group size, cost of care, and even type of care, for example child care center or family child care home (Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1995).

In order to provide care and education that will permit children to experience a high quality of life while helping them develop their abilities, a quality program must provide for the three basic needs all children have:

- Protection of their health and safety
- Building positive relationships
- Opportunities for stimulation and learning from experience

No one component is more or less important than the others, nor can one substitute for another. It takes all three to create quality care. Each of the three basic components of quality care manifests itself in tangible forms in the program's environment, curriculum, schedule, supervision and interaction, and can be observed. These are the key aspects of process quality that are included in our environmental rating scales.

Our scales define environment in a broad sense and guide the observer to assess the arrangement of space both indoors and outdoors, the materials and activities offered to the children, the supervision and interactions (including language) that occur in the classroom, and the schedule of the day, including routines and activities. The support offered to parents

and staff is also included.

All of our scales have been developed in close collaboration with realistic field-based sites. They have good interrater reliability and validity, thus making them suitable for research and program evaluation, as well as program improvement efforts. Each scale has a complete training program. The ECERS-R, ITERS and FDCRS training programs include an interactive videotape.

Research Use

The ECERS-R (1998) is the revised edition of the original ECERS (1980). It is currently being used in several major studies, including the Early Head Start Study (Mathematica Corporation), and Welfare, Children and Families: A Three City Study (Columbia University, University of Chicago, and Harvard University). The original ECERS was used in the Head Start FACES study, in which over 400 classroom are included nationwide. The preliminary results in all these studies show that the ECERS and the ECERS-R are performing very well.

In addition, it should be noted that the ECERS and ITERS were used as the comprehensive quality measures in the National Child Care Staffing Study (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1989) and the Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study (1995), the major studies of their time. The FDCRS was used in The Study of Children in Family Child Care and Relative Care (Galinsky, Howes, Kontos, & Shinn, 1994). In all of these studies, a relationship was found between higher scores on the ECERS and more positive child development outcomes in areas that are considered important for later school success. The effects of higher quality early childhood experiences have now been shown to last at least through the second grade of elementary school (Peisner-Feinberg, Burchinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan, Yazejian, Byler, Rustici, & Zelazo, 1999). Research is continuing to evaluate longer-lasting effects.

It is also interesting to note that our scales have been used in research studies and program improvement efforts in many other countries including Canada, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Russia, Iceland, Portugal, England, Spain, Austria, Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, Hungary and Greece. They have been proven reliable and valid in each country with relatively minor adaptations. No doubt there are cultural differences among these various countries, yet each of these countries adheres to a core set of child development goals and early childhood practices common to most modern industrialized countries (Tietze, et al, 1996). It has been shown that in England, Greece, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Austria, higher scores on the scales are related to more positive child development outcomes (Petrogannis & Melhuish, 1996, European Child Care and Education Study Group, 1997). This provides evidence that children from many backgrounds require similar inputs for success in developmental areas valued in western industrialized countries.

The Environmental Rating Scales in Program Improvement

Since the use of the environmental rating scales in research has been well documented in the literature, it is important to describe here some of the current uses of our scales in program improvement efforts in the US and in other countries. The scales are used in a variety of ways including for self-assessment by center staff, preparation for accreditation, and voluntary improvement efforts by licensing or other agencies. For example, in the United States:

- The state of Arkansas has trained personnel, who do assessments and provide training and technical assistance so that child care centers and homes can increase their quality of care. The Federal money allotments for improving child care are linked to measurable

program improvement on the scales. Another innovative feature of the Arkansas program is that parents who select child care facilities with an average of 4.5 or higher on our scales are eligible for two times the state child care tax exemption. Thus both parents and providers are being rewarded for quality improvements that benefit the children.

- The state of Connecticut uses our scales in selecting child care facilities for the inclusion of children with handicapping conditions. The scales are subsequently used for program improvement after these children have been placed. This has enabled the early intervention program to close most of their self-contained classrooms and move the children into inclusive programs. North Carolina has a similar program called "Partnerships for Inclusion", which has been effective in on-site consultation with child care staff to include children with disabilities in programs for typically developing children. The scales are used as a basis for their consultants.
- The state of Colorado uses the scales in a variety of program improvement and evaluation projects. For example, Denver has a quality improvement program that uses on site consultation and training based on scale scores. Many of the centers participating in this program serve poor and minority children and their families. The state of Colorado is currently considering a tiered reimbursement system using the scales.
- Many counties involved in the state of North Carolina's quality improvement program, Smart Start, require training on and the use of the scales in self assessment before a center or family child care home may apply for an individual grant. This ensures that the staff will order equipment, materials and/or request training based on needs that have been objectively substantiated.
- North Carolina also currently uses scale scores as part of their 5 star rated license system. Centers and family child care homes are awarded either one or two stars based on compliance with licensing standards. Programs may voluntarily apply for an additional three stars based on a set of quality measures including the licensing compliance record, teacher and director education, and the levels of process quality as measured by the appropriate environmental scale. Only the lowest level of licensing is mandatory. However, an additional fee is paid to the provider of subsidized care for each additional star earned voluntarily.
- The Oklahoma 3 star tiered license incorporates an evaluation with the scales in the second tier as a basis for quality improvement, and provides technical assistance based on scores for meeting accreditation standards. Tiered reimbursement is a part of this system.
- Tennessee is now initiating a rated license system, based on North Carolina's experience. In their system, however, program evaluation is not voluntary, but is required yearly to create a "Report Card" that must be posted with the license so child care consumers have access to reliable information on the quality of child care they are using for their children. Tiered reimbursement will also be tied to scores on the scale.
- Other states, including California, Massachusetts, Montana, Mississippi, Kansas, Oregon, Kentucky, New Mexico, Georgia, Florida, Wisconsin, and Nebraska have also