

Understanding the Meaning of Environment Rating Scale Scores

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Many things will affect the care and education that teachers provide for the children in child care. The cultural preferences or other beliefs of the adults involved, the curriculum approach used, the physical conditions of a building, finances, or staffing issues are some examples of variables that affect what a program is able to provide in terms of scores on the Environment Rating Scales. Because of these variables, it is unlikely that programs will do well on all requirements of the scales.

The important thing to remember, however, when considering scores on the Environment Rating Scales, is that the individual requirements of the scales are far less important than the average total score for any classroom. *It is the average total score that is related to positive child development, but not any of the single requirements by themselves.* The scales are weighted, through repetition of important requirements, to ensure that the most important things for positive development are more heavily represented than single details. This provides some flexibility with regard to how and when requirements are met while allowing that the larger ideals within the scales, of protection, learning, and positive relationships, are ensured.

Flexibility is possible, to some extent, in how a program wishes to provide a high quality program. As long as the classroom's average total score meets enough of the requirements of the scale, a center can consider which indicators they will provide to improve chances for child development, while recognizing that they are not providing others. This making of choices will not harm children's development substantially, *unless too many requirements are not met*, causing an average total score to be too low.

Here are some examples of how this works.

1. A center might decide that art materials should not be accessible to preschoolers without intense supervision. There would be too much mess. So art materials are only used with the whole group, under stringent teacher supervision. Art materials are not accessible at any other times, limiting children's opportunities. This decision would cause the classroom to score low on the ECERS-R Art item.

This, in itself, would not be likely to affect children's overall development significantly. However, if the children were denied substantial access to using many other materials, this would create a lower average total score, because many scores would be low. This is because access to a variety of materials that children can learn from is important to children's development. Thus, this requirement is weighted in the scale through repetition in various items because children's development would be affected negatively.

2. Teachers in a room may think that manners are very important for one-year-olds during meals and snacks. They believe that the children should all wait, until food is served to everyone, before eating anything from the plate that is placed in front of them. They enforce the no-eating rule with no flexibility, and punish children for eating ahead of time by taking their food from them. This action by the teachers would cause low scores on several items (e.g., Meals/snacks, Discipline, Staff-child interactions), decreasing the chances for a high average total score. If this type of practice, which has been shown to be associated with negative child development, is continued through the day, then other items would also be affected, making the chance for a high average total score impossible.

It is important for program staff to understand what they are choosing to do or not to do, and balance those choices in terms of what is possible. The scales assist program staff to make *well-informed* choices as to which areas the staff might emphasize in program improvement. It is not required that all things be perfect for a high average total score on the scales. But child care staff who wish to provide children with what they need for future success (and present well-being) need to be well informed about the choices they are making, and minimize low scores when possible.