



PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS: RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Recommended Practices

Recommendations for practices that strengthen early childhood programs are proposed based on findings from two studies. In one study, researchers in the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium conducted a study to assess program quality. In the second study, observations were conducted using the Environment Rating Scales as part of the Missouri Quality Rating System Pilot Study. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised is widely used to assess preschool classrooms. A total of 191 preschool classrooms in Missouri were observed for these studies and provide the basis for information in this recommended practices document.

Items from the Environment Rating Scale that were consistently rated as below average were divided into two program components: health and safety issues and programming/curriculum. Specific recommendations for improving programs are outlined below.

Health and Safety Issues: The majority of programs were observed having difficulty in bathroom cleanliness and hand washing procedures.

Recommended Practice: Bathrooms need to be sanitized frequently and the children need to be well supervised while in the bathroom. Young children are just beginning to learn skills related to going to the bathroom, flushing, washing hands, and using trash cans for the towels. Supervision in the bathroom is essential. It is recommended that programs have child-sized toilets and sinks and a hands-free trash can. (ECERS-R requires about 10 seconds for hand washing; state sanitation guidelines suggest 15-20 seconds.)

Programming/Curriculum: Most programs were observed as needing help in improving the following areas: science, math, art, and music activities; helping children reason; and using displayed materials as a teaching tool.

Recommended Practice: Learning centers need to be available to children the majority of each day. Materials, activities, books, and pictures that encourage children to explore should always be well organized and in good condition. While activities that require significant supervision and guidance from teachers take more time and energy, they are important to improve children's language and concept development and should be planned in various learning centers on a regular basis.

Nature/science – Nature/science projects that are hands-on allow children to experience the world around them using more of their senses. Nature and science materials should be available for children every day. More extensive activities, such as cooking, planting, or field trips, should occur at least every two weeks. Teachers should take advantage of natural events (weather, birds, plants, etc.) to help children better understand science concepts.

Math – Activities with tangible objects will help children understand math concepts and build the foundation for later, more advanced learning. Developmentally appropriate materials should be available for exploration every day—materials such as puzzles, games, scales, geometric shapes, paper and pencils, items to count and sort, and more. Children often need adult guidance with new math concepts, such as making charts of plant growth, measuring ingredients, locating the smallest and largest items in a group and sorting/counting items by color or type.

Art/Music/Movement – Not only do a variety of art, music, and movement materials need to be available, but the teachers need to help the children extend the use of them by encouraging creativity in how the materials are used. Teachers can provide props to enhance children’s creativity—scarves and other dance props for movement; leaves and toilet paper rolls for art; and musical instruments made by the children in the music area. In addition, the teacher can ask relevant questions to encourage children to discuss new ways to use the materials. For example, a teacher might ask the children to think of what they could make with paper towel rolls, tape, paint, and scrap paper.

Reasoning throughout the Day - Teachers need to encourage children to explain their reasoning when problem-solving. This will allow teachers to determine if children understand the related concepts. Based on children’s explanations, teachers could guide children to easier or harder games, projects, and activities based on the same concepts.

Displayed Materials – The materials displayed around the room should reflect the current activities and diversity of the children in the group. Children’s artwork and photos of their activities should be displayed at their eye level. In addition, their “masterpieces” made of clay or wood or paper towels rolls should be on display.

Sources

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