



Steps to Quality: Assessment and Verification Accommodations During COVID-19

QUALITY PRACTICES DURING A PANDEMIC

We all know life looks very different during a pandemic. What were quality practices before a pandemic are not necessarily best practice during a pandemic. For example, prior to COVID-19, quality practice in your child care facility would have included inviting a parent into the child's classroom at arrival time, allowing the teacher to greet both parent and child and supporting teacher/parent communication. However, during COVID-19 many child care facilities have transitioned to alternative drop-off and pick-up plans. During a pandemic, best practice for reducing the spread of the virus requires limiting physical contact, and the importance of this overrides the classroom arrival practice prior to the pandemic.

Steps to Quality understands that your quality practices might look different during this time. This document explains the accommodations we have made to our Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and step verifications to allow for the adjustments you might be making to maintain safe practices during a pandemic.

Please note: Steps to Quality understands you might not be in a position to have an ERS or step verification conducted in your program at this time. You might have closed temporarily, be struggling to manage new group sizes and physical distancing accommodations, or be closed to non-essential visitors. You might be struggling with your staffing or you might just be too stressed. Whatever the reason, we acknowledge your practice during the pandemic might not reflect your typical practice. You are welcome to utilize our grace period policy, allowing you to retain your current step while postponing your ERS or step verification until you feel ready. If you have questions, please talk to your regional Quality Consultant about using a grace period.

ERS ASSESSMENTS

Greeting/departing

Normally, items in this area are scored simply on observing a program's greeting and departing practices. Providers are encouraged to continue considering ways to support the important

quality aspects of greeting/departure. For example, a program might begin using the child's lunch box to receive and send home daily parent/teacher notes. During the pandemic, assessors will not only observe your program's current greeting/departing practices, but also interview you based on your pre-pandemic greeting/departing practices. For instance: "I noticed children are dropped off to a staff member outside. Is this your usual drop-off procedure?" If the answer is no, the assessor would ask: "Walk me through how children would be dropped off if it were not pandemic conditions." Scores in this area would be based on both observation and interview.

Provisions for relaxation and comfort

This assessment item mentions soft toys being accessible in a classroom. Since soft toys are more difficult to sanitize than solid toys, scores based on the pandemic practice of eliminating soft items from your program would be impacted. Providers are encouraged to continue considering how to provide opportunities for relaxation and comfort throughout the day. For example, creating a single-use quiet corner where a child could snuggle a stuffed animal brought from home and kept in her cubby. During the pandemic, assessors will not only observe your program's current provisions for relaxation and comfort, but also interview you based on your pre-pandemic practices. For example: "Has your cozy area always looked like this, or has it changed since Coronavirus?" If the answer is that it has changed, the assessor would ask: "Explain what it was like before Coronavirus." Scores in this area would be based on both observation and interview.

Sand and water play

This item may be affected if the use of sand/water/sensory tables are stopped or decreased due to concerns with children sharing the materials. Providers are encouraged to consider how to adjust your use of sand/water/sensory play to make it as safe as possible. For example, limit use to one child at a time, clean toys after a child has used them, or separate materials into smaller single-use bins. During the pandemic, assessors will not only observe the sand and water play in your program, but also interview you based on your pre-pandemic practices. For example: "I see you have a closed sand/water table. Describe how often you normally use the sand/water/sensory table with the children?" or, "I don't see a sand/water table. Have you made changes to this area since Coronavirus?" Scores in this area would be based on both observation and interview.

Use of community resources

Classrooms may not be doing field trips and using community resources due to group size guidelines and physical distancing during the pandemic. Providers are encouraged to consider how to safely utilize community resources, remembering that it can be as easy as a walk to a

nearby park. However, assessors will both observe your program for the inclusion of community resources and interview you based on your use of community resources prior to the pandemic. For example: “What resources in the community are you currently using? Are field trips being planned and/or taken? What did this look like before the pandemic?” Scores in this area would be based on both observation and interview.

STEP VERIFICATIONS

To support physical distancing, all verification visits have transitioned to a virtual platform. Verifiers contact a provider prior to the scheduled activity and request certain items be emailed for review ahead of time (ie, your parent/staff handbook). On the day of your verification, a verifier will utilize a video conference platform (Zoom, Facetime, etc.) to contact you. As if they were there with you in person, the verifier will use this time to ask questions and allow you to show files, items posted in your facility, and classroom practices as they are happening. This is your time to demonstrate your current level of quality, you’ll just be doing it through video.

The following are the indicators that are likely to require some accommodations if you are going to try to complete them during the pandemic. You might be able to provide evidence of the indicator having been met within the prior 12 months and before the pandemic was a concern. Otherwise, you might have to think creatively about how to reach success in these quality areas while also considering the safety needs related to COVID-19.

Health Consultant visit, Step 2

Quality Domain: Health, Safety and Wellness

A visit from a Health Consultant in the prior 12 months could have occurred in-person in your facility before the pandemic, or could occur now virtually using a video conferencing platform (Zoom, Facetime, etc.). In-person or virtually, Health Consultants are a great resource!

Communication with families, Step 2

Quality Domain: Partnership with Families and Communities

Remember that communication with families does not have to be all face-to-face. Whether there is a pandemic going on or not, communication methods with families can include newsletters, Facebook groups, dry erase boards posted outside of the building, parent/teacher communication apps, and more!

Social/educational events and opportunities for parents to volunteer, Step 3

Quality Domain: Partnership with Families and Communities

Evidence of events having occurred anytime in the prior year are sufficient. For example, if you are having your verification visit in September 2020, you could show the flyer you used for the volunteer sig-up at your school's rummage sale in October 2019 and your invitation to your winter party in December 2019. If you haven't yet had any social/educational events or opportunities for parents to volunteer, it's time to start thinking creatively! Could parents volunteer to do an online drive for hand sanitizer donations? Could you host a pediatric dentist who does a Zooms event for parents in your program and demonstrates oral hygiene for toddlers? There are lots of options!

Mealtime practices, Step 3

Quality Domain: Health, Safety and Wellness

See: "Transitioning from Family Style Service to Pre-Plated Meal Service: Maintaining Responsive Feeding and Responsive Eating in Child Care during COVID19 Pandemic."

Partnering with families and agencies, Step 4

Quality Domain: Partnering with Families and Communities

Evidence of your partnerships can include written evidence, such as letters of correspondence, contracts, or details of a professional relationship with an agency or organization. It can also include documentation of virtual, in-person, or physically-distanced visits from or to community resources, such as the local library or local elementary school.

Parent-teacher conferences, Steps 4 and 5

Quality Domain: Partnering with Families and Communities

Evidence of parent-teacher conferences having happened in-person in the prior year, as well as conducting parent-teacher conferences now using a videoconferencing platform (Zoom, Facetime, etc.) or other physically-distanced measures, all work for this indicator. How will you make it work for you?

Hosting a health and safety class, Step 5

Quality Domain: Health, Safety and Wellness

Evidence of a class for children, parents and/or staff having happened in-person in the prior year, as well as holding a class now using a videoconferencing platform (Zoom, Facetime, etc.) or other physically-distance measures, both work for this indicator. Be creative!

Child Inclusion Plans, Step 5

Quality Domain: Inclusion and Diversity

This important document is created in collaboration with a child's parent(s). If you don't have documentation of one happening in the prior year, don't hesitate to use a video conferencing platform or physically-distanced location to meet and discuss the children in your care with their parent(s). For example, a 45-minute meeting over Zoom and a quick signature the next day at drop-off are great physically-distanced ways to partner on an inclusion plan. How could you make it work with a parent in your program?

Family participation in program development, Step 5

Quality Domain: Partnering with Families and Communities

You might have loads of documentation of family participation already occurring within the last year, but if you are trying to think creatively about how to reach this level of quality during the pandemic consider emailing a family survey or holding a parent advisory board meeting using a video conferencing platform (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.). There are lots of great ways to be safe during a pandemic and continue including families in your program development!