

Environment Rating Scale Scores: Making Wise Choices about Materials and their Use

As more facilities participate in the IdahoSTARS Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Steps to Quality, attention has been focused on the Environment Rating Scales (FCCERS-R, ITERS-R, ECERS-R, SACERSU, ITERS-3, and ECERS-3). The rating scales are one important part of a whole system that is working toward improving care for young children.

The following article by Michelle Mallonee entitled, *Taking an ERS Look At the Big Picture: It's More Than the Score*, sums up the importance of looking at the whole classroom and making wise choices about materials and their use.

First, let's remember that the scales are designed to take a "point in time" look into the opportunities that are regularly being offered to children in a particular classroom/environment and rate those opportunities on a 1-7 scale of quality. As programs work to improve quality, scores are expected to rise.

For many facilities the focus becomes the "score" that is needed to obtain their goal. This often leads both directors and teachers to start over-thinking the process and start adding all kinds of extra materials into the classroom (because we need X amount of softness, and X amount musical instruments, and X amount of nature/science, etc.). Then the classroom begins to become overcrowded with all of the "stuff" that is required to get the needed score.

When the focus gets wrapped up in the numbers of materials and the numbers for the score, that big picture of the opportunities that are offered to the children tends to get lost in the shuffle. Classrooms can quickly become over-stimulating for children, which is exactly opposite of the intent of the scales. Materials added without knowledge of how to integrate them into daily practices and schedules may not add to the quality of the children's experience.

How to Make Wise Choices

Instead of looking at the numbers of materials required for each subscale and indicator separately, try looking at them as a whole. Stand in one spot of your classroom and look around. Can you easily see materials for fine motor, art, sensory, nature/science, and math? Can you see materials that represent diversity? Is the environment warm and welcoming with places to curl up and get comfy? Does the environment give you the feeling that this is a place meant to explore and discover and it is okay to touch things here?

Look at what materials you have already that fit into more than one category. For example:

- Puzzles represent fine motor but depending on the picture of the puzzle they may also represent math, science, and/or diversity.
- Hanging plants in the room where children can see, touch and experience the plant can work for child display as well as nature/science.
- When looking for softness in the environment look at soft toys that fit into more than one category, such as fabric covered balls and blocks, puppets (multicultural), cushions, cushioned chairs and couches (furniture).

Remember that though materials of similar interest need to be grouped by category (math, art, blocks, dramatic play,) this does not mean that they are only found in one place in the environment. For example:

- A dramatic play prop box with a gardening theme may cover part of both dramatic play as well as nature/science.
- Language and cognitive games such as sound bingo or memory cards with realistic animals pictured provide experiences in nature/science, books and pictures, encouraging children to communicate, using language, math and number.

Much variety can be accomplished through rotating. When storing additional materials, try storing them in sets that represent a variety of categories. For example:

- Don't put all of the puzzles representing diversity on the shelf in April to ensure there are some left when you rotate the materials in May.
- Try grouping puzzles in sets that include math (number/shape), science (realistic animals) diversity (people of different race, age, ability, culture, or non-traditional roles) plus some favorites or more pieces as the year goes along. This way when you rotate materials you still have a variety in all areas.

Interaction is the Key

Keep in mind that how you interact with the children when using materials is as important as the materials themselves. The intent of the reaching a certain numbers of materials in the ERS is to be certain that children are provided with enough types and variety to stimulate a wide range of interests and abilities. But of course the materials cannot do the job alone. It is the way that the teachers and children use those materials to expand upon the child's interests, explore the unknown, discover new concepts, and create fun new and exciting things to learn that makes the difference. Some examples:

- Are you encouraging children to think creatively? Are you asking them questions to hear their opinion and their reasoning? (What shape do you think will fit best? What size of block should go on the bottom? Why do you think the big blocks are better?)
- Trial and error is good risk taking that leads to individual success and development of new concepts. Asking children what could be done differently when something doesn't work provides them the opportunity to think through the situation and make additional suggestions.
- Try looking at something a child is interested in and using those materials in a different way. If a child's main interest is in the match box cars, try suggesting sorting the cars by size, type, color, shape. Make a chart to record the findings. Separate the race cars and see how many have a particular number on them. Use the cars to dip into paint and create tire tracks. Sort by color and then see if you have enough of a variety to make a rainbow out of vehicles. Create your own / Spy book using the cars as a background.

The Environment Rating Scales are a guide to creating a rich, nurturing environment that will promote optimal development of the children in your care. The scales can play an important role in improving the quality of care when used in the course of daily practice and schedules.

Choosing materials wisely and learning how to use the materials well will encourage positive outcomes in children while they are in your classroom and long afterward. The guiding principle of all our efforts is the same: to focus on what we know to be good for children.