



Assessing Play Environments: A Play Rating Scale

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Prepared for Trident United Way Director's Forum
July 13, 2006



The reality today

Today's early childhood teachers are keenly aware of increasing accountability to standards and often, this is misguidedly visited upon the classroom as pressure from administrators or parents to limit or entirely do away with play (Fromberg, 2003; Hyun, 2003)

What are your feelings about this issue?

- What are you hearing from parents?
- What are you hearing from your teachers?
- What are you hearing from other directors?
- What are you hearing from those to whom you are accountable?
- What's the difference between 'free play' (ECERS) and 'other' play?

Research Literature (as if you didn't already know this)

- High quality play promotes academic achievement
- Block play develops mathematical thinking (Andrews, 1999; Ginsburg, Inoue & Seo, 1999; Kamii, 1982; Seo, 2003; Wolfgang, Stannard & Jones, 2001) & spatial reasoning (Reifel, 1984, 1996)
- Sand and water play develops concepts about physical properties and conservation
- Complex dramatic play is well known as a vehicle for the development of language and literacy skills (Pickett, 1998; Stroud, 1995) & problem-solving.



High Quality Play Environments provide children on-going opportunities to initiate, engage in, and extend play

- Provision for interesting and inviting materials and play opportunities
- Management of the environment and activities that is sensitive to children's needs & interests
- The teacher's responsibility is to observe, see meaning as it is being constructed by children, and facilitate complex play with both direct and indirect intervention strategies
- Supports and respects cultural differences and assumes inclusion in play environments of children with special needs (Phelps & Hanline, 1999)
- Reflects elements of high quality curricular approaches, such as visual documentation of activities and learning (Gandini, Edwards, and Forman, 1994) or visual and accurate labeling of materials & storage (High Scope)

Access to play assessments limited

- Informal assessments focus mainly on complexity of play Phelps & Hanline, 1999; Reifel, 1982; 1984)
- NAEYC accreditation materials and criteria
 - New process comprehensive, but not feasible (or accessible) for all, very time-consuming & expensive
 - Criteria related to play are embedded/integrated
- ECERS
 - In original version (1982) barely mentioned
 - In new version, addressed more comprehensively
 - 4,7,8 (arrangement & materials)
 - 22,23, 24 (blocks, sand/water, dramatic)
 - 29, 30 (supervision)
 - 32, 33 (interactions)
 - 35 (free play – what's the difference?)

Goal of this tool is to provide easy way to assess play from two perspectives

Differing contexts

- Indoor
- Outdoor
- Blocks
- Sand & Water
- Socio-dramatic

Constants across contexts:

- Environment & materials
- Management/access
- Intervention & support strategies

Features of this assessment

- Familiar format to those who have used NAEYC and/or ECERS
- Simplified 4 point Likert scale-inadequate, minimal, good, excellent (ECERS)
- Descriptive narrative criteria (ECERS & NAEYC)
- Each sub-scale has the same 3 dimensions (environment & materials, management, facilitation strategies) for ease of comparison across sub-scales
- *Snapshots (SC GSGS ELStds)**
- Addresses all major contexts of child-initiated & teacher-facilitated play (indoor, outdoor, sand/water, blocks, dramatic play)

*in progress

General Indoor play environment

Minimum requirements: indoor play includes individual centers for blocks, sand and water, and dramatic play

	(1) Inadequate	(2) Minimum	(3) Good: All of (2) plus:	(4) Excellent: All of (3) plus
Physical environment & materials	Centers not designated or clearly defined	Interest areas designated and basic materials available on daily basis Display space available for children's work	Each interest area can accommodate 3-5 children Clearly defined boundaries Materials organized, labeled and accessible to children Materials provide for variety of developmental levels Multicultural/non gender specific materials in each center or interest area	Materials and toys reflect the culture and background of individual children in room Flexible & integrated use of play areas encouraged
Management	Play scheduled in short (15-30 minutes) blocks of time	Play scheduled in at least 30 minute blocks	Free play daily at least one hour AM and PM	Large periods of extended time for play (most of day spent in play)
Intervention and support strategies	Teacher occupied in other activities while children play	Teacher present but involvement limited to monitoring and responding to children's requests	Teacher aware of play levels of individual children and groups of children Teacher moves around room during play time and intervenes appropriately at times	Teacher uses children's products to assess and plan appropriate facilitation strategies for individual children and groups of children Documentation and display of children's work is ongoing

Indoors



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General Outdoor play environment

Minimum outdoor environment: Play area set aside for children that is safe and protected from traffic or other hazards.

	(1) Inadequate	(2) Minimum	(3) Good: All of (2) plus:	(4) Excellent: All of (3) plus
Physical environment & materials	<p>Area used for play not planned for children (i.e. lawn, parking lot, etc.)</p> <p>No designated areas for different kinds of outdoor play</p>	<p>Balance of shade/sun</p> <p>Some gross motor equipment available but not designed necessarily or planned specifically for developmental levels of children</p> <p>Children free to choose activities, but interest areas may not be clearly defined or equipped</p>	<p>Variety of surfaces (hard, soft, grass, etc.)</p> <p>Gross motor equipment appropriate to age/developmental levels of children</p> <p>Interest areas clearly defined for gross motor, sand and water, dramatic play, and games</p> <p>Props available for dramatic play</p>	<p>“Real” construction and gardening materials available</p> <p>Display area includes evidence of outdoor play</p> <p>Outdoor area extends and fully supports and complements indoor environment and activities.</p>
Management	<p>Outdoor play not available on daily basis</p>	<p>Outdoor area used by all children daily</p> <p>Sand and water available occasionally but use restricted</p>	<p>Sand and water available daily</p> <p>Materials rotated regularly</p>	<p>Children extend/continue indoor play themes outdoors with props, space, time, etc.</p> <p>Children document and revisit own work and play outside.</p>
Intervention and support strategies	<p>Teacher monitors play from a distance</p>		<p>Teacher moves freely among children, observing and occasionally intervening to help children develop skills and extend play</p>	<p>Teacher observes/documents and facilitates play as needed</p>

Outdoors



Block Play

Minimum materials: Unit blocks (at least 200 unit blocks per child), hollow blocks or other materials for building large structures (e.g. waffle blocks), a variety of smaller table-top block such as Legos and flexible blocks; accessories such as play people, trucks, etc.

	(1) Inadequate	(2) Minimum	(3) Good: All of (2) plus:	(4) Excellent: All of (3) plus
Physical Environment & materials	<p>No area set aside specifically for block play.</p> <p>Less than minimum basic materials</p>	<p>Area set aside for blocks out of traffic.</p> <p>Minimum basic materials for 2-3 children.</p> <p>Flat floor and table surfaces available for construction</p>	<p>Area clearly and concretely defined with physical boundaries.</p> <p>Props represent cultural differences, such as play people of differing ethnicities, family configurations, and abilities</p> <p>Area supports play for 3-5 children and does not interfere with ongoing activities in other parts of room, but is in close proximity to dramatic play center.</p>	<p>Block area include shapes representative of various cultures (i.e., Egyptian columns or obelisks, Russian domes, etc.)</p> <p>Props included that minimize aggressive play, such as adult and baby animals, scraps of cloth for use as blankets, play food.</p>
Management	<p>Blocks not available on daily basis.</p>	<p>Storage spaces labeled and accessible to all children</p>	<p>Shelf labeling incorporates photographs or outlines of blocks for easy identification of proper storage.</p> <p>Books and pictures of models and children's constructions displayed</p> <p>Organized, but flexible system for identifying children who want to play in center to respond to children's interests</p>	<p>Block storage is arranged according to shape and in descending size order from left to right, with accessibility adaptations for children with special needs (e.g., tactile labeling for the visually impaired child.)</p> <p>Teacher encourages themed play with props related to current interests of the children and integration of block play with other areas such as housekeeping, science, socio-dramatic play, and art.</p>
Intervention and support strategies	<p>Block play unsupervised; teacher activity focused on monitoring or enforcing of rules.</p>	<p>Teacher intervention only when children request help.</p> <p>Children play in block area for short (less than 30 minutes) periods of time.</p>	<p>Teacher regularly uses intervention strategies to assist children with construction skills as needed.</p> <p>Teacher encourages dialogue about constructions, such as "can you tell me about what you are building?"</p>	<p>Teacher uses appropriate, play-tutoring intervention strategies such as modeling, and questions that prompt mathematical thinking (e.g., 'how many more blocks do you need to make this tower the same size as the other one?')</p> <p>Provision made for "keeping" or documenting structures (photos, scrapbooks, etc.)</p> <p>Teacher facilitates revisitation of earlier constructions through dialogue and group conversation/sharing.</p>

Block Play



Sand and water play

Minimum materials:

Provisions for Sand and water (table, basin, etc.) Accessories such as toys, pouring implements , shovels, etc.

	(1) Inadequate	(2) Minimum	(3) Good: All of (2) plus:	(4) Excellent: All of (3) plus
Physical environment & materials	Either no sand and water or one but not the other available indoors or out.	Both sand and water available daily indoors and out. Minimum materials limited to buckets, shovels, cups, spoons, etc. Same props available each day.	Props added/rotated regularly for both sand and water Alternate materials added or substituted occasionally for interest such as cornstarch, rice, etc.	Teacher plans addition of toys, implements in response to children's emerging interests and skills Sand/water play props relate to other activities/current themes of interest in other play areas
Management	Sand and water play restricted or not available daily	Experimentation limited by rules	Children encouraged to explore and test ideas, develop themes Children are allowed to integrate sand and water props with materials from other interest areas	Children can document and revisit sand and water play with photos, video, journals, etc.
Intervention and support strategies	No direct supervision of children while playing in sand and water area.	Teacher monitors for splashing, throwing sand, etc., but does not intervene in play	Teacher encourages dialogue, descriptions, conversations as children play. Teacher asks open-ended questions Children encouraged to relate sand and water play to other areas such as art and science	Teacher observes and documents play and responds with appropriate interventions as children's concepts about physical properties emerge

Sand & Water



Socio-dramatic Play:

Minimum materials: Housekeeping furniture, dress-up clothes; simple housekeeping props such as play food, dolls, blankets, telephone

	(1) Inadequate	(2) Minimum	(3) Good: All of (2) plus:	(4) Excellent: All of (3) plus
Physical environment & materials	<p>No defined area set aside for dramatic play</p> <p>Less than minimum materials</p>	<p>Dramatic play area and props focus on housekeeping.</p> <p>Space is set aside for prop storage, but not organized by theme.</p>	<p>Basic props reflect cultural diversity, such as ethnic play food, clothing and dolls.</p> <p>Area supports play for 3-5 children and does not interfere with ongoing activities in other parts of room.</p>	<p>Props evolve in response to children's interests in themes and personal experiences.</p> <p>Themed props include materials that invite children to engage in complex use of literacy, math, social skills, etc. (e.g., for restaurant or fast food play, order pads, recipe cards, menus reflecting the languages spoken by children in the classroom, money, headset, cash register, material for sign making, etc.)</p>
Management	<p>Area not available on daily basis</p>	<p>Area available daily</p> <p>Same props available all of the time</p> <p>Play duration limited (less than 30 minutes)</p>	<p>Materials organized and storage provided for access by children as needed.</p> <p>Space provided beyond housekeeping area for themed play</p> <p>Props rotated regularly</p>	<p>Method of documentation available & used to for children to revisit play (video, tape recorders, photos, etc.)</p>
Intervention and support strategies	<p>Teacher monitors play for attention to rules.</p> <p>Not involved in observation or intervention</p>	<p>Teacher responds to children's requests for help and will supply additional props when requested</p> <p>Children's play not coordinated to themes</p>	<p>Children encouraged to integrate dramatic play with other areas</p> <p>Outdoor dramatic play area and props available to extend play</p> <p>Teacher observes play, discusses and asks questions, assists children in extending play themes when requested</p> <p>Teacher assists unfocused children</p>	<p>Parents involved in supplying props; informed of current themes and interests of children</p> <p>Teacher observes and documents socio-dramatic play regularly</p> <p>Teacher uses appropriate intervention strategies to facilitate elaborate and extended themed play.</p> <p>Teacher encourages extension of play themes to outdoor socio-dramatic play area</p>

Dramatic Play



Scoring (with sample scores)

	Indoor (12)	Outdoor (12)	Sand/water (12)	Blocks (12)	Socio- Dramatic (12)	Sub-Total scores across dimensions
Environment & materials (20)	3	2	3	4	3	15/20
Management (20)	4	4	3	3	4	18/20
Facilitation (20)	3	4	2	2	4	15/20
Sub-Total scores for each sub- scale	10/12	10/12	8/12	9/12	11/12	Total Score (48/60)

Interpreting results

- A total score reflects the overall quality of play in the context of the environment.
- If scores for each sub-scale are analyzed separately, each scale can provide feedback on a particular type of play (indoor, outdoor, sand/water, blocks, dramatic).
- If scores across sub-scales are analyzed separately, feedback is provided for a particular dimension of play (materials, management, facilitation)
- The descriptors, like both the ECERS and NAEYC criteria provide 'self-correcting' information for improvement

HELP!!!

I want to pilot use of this tool with both individual teachers and programs to collect data & feedback for further development.

If any of you would be interested in participating in a pilot, please sign up & I will provide you with materials & consent forms!