

# making long-lasting changes with the Environment Rating Scales

by Thelma Harms

An assessment with the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) is designed to give early childhood administrators and teaching staff much more than a set of quality scores. Appropriately used, an ERS assessment can provide a blueprint for planning and carrying out both immediate and long-range program improvements. Unfortunately, programs often complete assessments on their classrooms, but don't use them to inform their program improvement efforts in a systematic way. Whether the assessment is a self-assessment or was done by an outside observer, such as the official assessor of a state-run



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Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) or a technical assistance specialist, it is essential for the teaching staff to understand the specific requirements for each item in the scale in order to make meaningful changes. The classroom quality score is an average score, and by itself, is not helpful to guide program improvement. Giving the staff a copy of the score sheet completed by the assessor is not sufficient feedback either, because it is hard to figure out. In order to use an ERS assessment as a basis for planning and implementing program improvement, frontline staff must be given specific information in an easy-to-read format that points out program strengths, and gives specific information about what needs to be done to improve the low-scoring items.

## Providing specific feedback

Each item on the ERS contains specific indicators on four levels of quality: inadequate (1), minimal (3), good (5), and excellent (7). In the majority of items, the level of quality is determined by what is observed in the classroom. In order to plan for improvement, the staff and administrators who will actually be making the improvements need to have access to a copy of the scale in order to read and understand the requirements of each indicator that they were not given credit

for. By comparing the scale requirements with the observed practice reported by the observer, they will be able to make realistic plans for changes that will work in their own setting.

In many of the state-run QRIS programs, the official assessor writes a 'Summary Report' giving details about what was observed that did not meet the ERS requirement for each indicator of all items with a score below a 5. This report can be used to generate a plan for improvement by comparing what is required in the ERS to what was observed. Similarly, if a self-assessment completed by the teaching staff or an administrator is going to be useful as a basis for planning, it must contain specific notes describing what was observed.

An important initial step in planning is to look through the 'Summary Report' or the self-assessment for low-scoring items with a similar cause. For example, a center classroom or family child care home may have an abundance of materials out in the activity centers, but still get scores below a 5 on a number of activities because the children do not have access to those materials for the required amount of time. One of the key quality issues in the ERS is carrying out a schedule that gives children access to many types of materials for long periods of time. Other key issues in the

### Sample Plan of Action Form

Classroom (or FCC Home) \_\_\_\_\_ Planning Team \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Item Number & Score	Indicator missed	Description of Concerns	Plan for Improvement	Time Needed and Person Responsible	Follow-Up
#17, 3	5.1				
#	5.2				

ERS include health and safety practices, honoring diversity and inclusion, language development, and positive support for social-emotional development. Since these key issues influence many specific scores, they occur in many different contexts.

#### Making and implementing a plan for improvement

The next step in the improvement process is to have the staff complete

a 'Plan of Action.' This can be done with the help of a technical assistance specialist or by the staff members and their director themselves. The 'Plan of Action' form illustrated above helps the planning team think about what is needed to improve specific aspects of the program. The 'Plan of Action' is usually completed only for items with scores below 5.

The Plan of Action gives the planning team a systematic way to state, in

simple language, what was observed that caused each score below 5 and the action that needs to be taken to improve performance on that item. In order to illustrate how a planning team can use the specific feedback given to them after an ERS assessment to plan for corrective action, let's use ECERS-R Item 17: Using language to develop reasoning skills, reproduced below.

Item 17 assesses how well the staff is using language to introduce concepts

Inadequate		Minimal		Good		Excellent	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>17. Using language to develop reasoning skills</b>							
1.1 Staff do not talk with children about logical relationships (Ex. ignore children's questions and curiosity about why things happen, do not call attention to sequence of daily events, differences and similarity in number, size, shape; cause and effect).		3.1 Staff sometimes talk about logical relationships or concepts (Ex. explain that outside time comes after snacks, point out differences in sizes of blocks child used).*		5.1 Staff talk about logical relationships while children play with materials that stimulate reasoning (Ex. sequence cards, same/different games, size and shape toys, sorting games, number and math games).*		7.1 Staff encourage children to reason throughout the day, using actual events and experiences as a basis for concept development (Ex. children learn sequence by talking about their experiences in the daily routine or recalling the sequence of a cooking project).*	
1.2 Concepts are introduced inappropriately (Ex. concepts too difficult for age and abilities of children; inappropriate teaching methods used such as worksheets without any concrete experiences; teacher gives answers without helping children to figure things out).*		3.2 Some concepts are introduced appropriately for ages and abilities of children in group, using words and concrete experiences. (Ex. guide children with questions and words to sort big and little blocks or to figure out the cause for ice melting).*		5.2 Children are encouraged to talk through or explain their reasoning when solving problems (Ex. why they sorted objects into different groups; in what way are two pictures the same or different).*		7.2 Concepts are introduced in response to children's interests or needs to solve problems (Ex. talk children through balancing a tall block building; help children figure out how many spoons are needed to set table).*	
<b>*Notes for Clarification:</b>							
5.1 At least one instance must be observed; 5.2 At least two instances must be observed							

such as matching, classifying, sequencing, one-to-one correspondence, spatial relationships, and cause and effect in an appropriate manner. Suppose that a classroom earned a score of 3 on this item. The observer's notes show that credit for 3.1 was given because several times the staff talked about logical concepts during the day in practical situations such as announcing that everybody had 5 minutes to clean up before they could go outside (sequence). Credit was given for 3.2 because several incidents were observed when staff introduced concepts appropriately during play or while children were helping with routines. For example, when a child was having trouble completing a puzzle, a teacher suggested strategies such as matching the color or shape of the piece he was trying to fit into the unfinished puzzle. However, according to the feedback given by the assessor, no credit was given for 5.1 because, "No instance was observed of a teacher explaining logical relationships **while children were playing with materials specifically designed to teach logical relationships.**" Credit could not be given for 5.2 because "No instances were observed of a teacher **asking children to explain the reason for solving a problem while they were using materials that have built in logical concepts.**"

By reading the requirements in the ECERS-R for Item 17, 5.1, and 5.2 and consulting the *All About ECERS-R* book (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2003) for additional explanations and examples, the staff can now form a plan to make more focused, intentional use of the many materials that have built-in logical concepts. They might plan to put out on tables and attract attention to materials such as sequencing cards, number and counting

puzzles, dominos, and balance scales with objects to weigh, that often sit on the shelves unused. The staff also will need to remember to explain the logical concept to the children when they use the material. Later, after the children have completed the game, staff will need to ask them to explain their reasoning, thus reinforcing the concept. Extending children's experiences in language and reasoning in this item is characteristic of the kind of specific planning that may be required for many items in order to raise scores.

The 'Plan of Action' calls for the plans to be as concrete as possible, with a designated person named to follow through, and a reasonable time frame to complete the plan. The 'Follow-up' column provides a place to record progress. In order to move things along, the 'Plan of Action' should be reviewed monthly and a new form filled out to reflect the status of changes.

### Setting short- and long-range goals

Most of the scale requirements will be possible for the staff to address directly. For example, significant changes can be made by modifying the schedule, making a wider variety of materials accessible, or removing torn, developmentally inappropriate, prejudicial, or frightening books. These are the short-term goals staff should concentrate on accomplishing as soon as possible. Although most of the ERS items concern aspects of the program that the teaching staff has considerable control over, there are some items that are clearly out of staff members' control. Such items as improving the safety of the playground and purchasing additional playground equipment may require long-range plans. However, the long-range goals should not be ignored

because they also affect the quality of children's experience in their learning environment.

It is quite common for programs to underestimate the time and effort it will take to make long-lasting changes. Anyone who has lost weight on a miracle diet and gained it all back will tell you that quick changes, although dramatic, do not continue unless deeply rooted habits that influence daily practices are changed. Recognizing this reality has caused many QRIS programs to provide technical assistance over a longer period of time instead of going over the 'Plan of Action' in a one-time consultation, and leaving the sometimes overwhelming implementation process to the staff. It is invaluable to have the guidance of a consultant who has been well trained on the ERS, has knowledge of many different types of resources, and vast experience with a variety of facilities and programs. The consultant needs a number of appointments to work with the classroom improvement team, in order to break the improvement plan down into more manageable phases. Instead of trying to improve all the low-scoring ERS items at the same time, the staff could be helped to work on one subscale of the ERS, or even on a few items at a time.

### Conclusion

The ultimate value of an assessment with the ERS is to improve the daily experiences that children and their teachers share in an early childhood setting. The process of creating lasting change requires using the scales accurately, becoming a sensitive and reliable observer, learning how to set and achieve short-term goals that give staff a sense of accomplishment and improve the quality of children's lives, and documenting

long-range goals that require advocacy, teamwork, and patience to accomplish.

If our goal is to provide programs that meet young children's needs for health and safety, give support and guidance for social-emotional development as well as provide opportunities for developmentally appropriate learning, we have to face the challenge of making lasting changes in our ongoing, daily programs. The flurry of activity preceding an evaluation may result in some short-term improvements, but enduring improvements require establishing a routine of ongoing monitoring and assessment. Regular assessments can identify such practical issues as when consumable supplies need replacement (e.g., sand in the sandbox, new books to replace torn ones), when teaching skills need refreshing, and help us remember that the long-range projects also need attention. Maybe a yearly comprehensive 'check-up' is a good idea for classrooms as well as for people!

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## Web site

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