

Taking an ERS Look at the Big Picture:
It's More Than the Score

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As more and more early education facilities have become involved with the Keystone STARS program and Pennsylvania's initiative on higher quality early care and education a great deal of focus has been turned towards the Environment Rating Scales.

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 advance through the STARS system expected scores for quality rating advance as well.

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., etc.) and the classroom begins to become overcrowded with all of the "stuff" that is required in the ERS 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 the children which is in opposition of the true intent of the ERS. Materials are added without thought of how to integrate them into daily practices and schedules which causes other issues and again is not the intent. Both of these "last minute" additions may have a negative impact on the assessment and do not accurately represent what children experience on a daily basis.

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 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 such as fabric covered balls and blocks, puppets, cushions, cushioned chairs and couches. Remember that though materials of similar interest need to be grouped by category (math, art, blocks, dramatic play, etc.) does not mean that is the only place in the environment where these materials may be found. 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 are other materials that provide experiences for more than one category

When storing additional materials for rotation, try storing them in sets that offer a variety of categories. Like the puzzles, if all of your puzzles representing diversity are on the shelf in April, do you have any 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) and just some favorites or increase in numbers of pieces for stronger ability as the year goes along. This way when you rotate materials you still have a variety in all areas.

Keep in mind that it is not enough to just have the materials accessible to the children but also how you interact with the children when using those materials. Are you encouraging children to think creatively? Are you telling them how to play a game or what piece to use in a block building or are you asking them questions to get their opinion and the reasoning behind that idea? (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 I Spy book using the cars as a background.



I spy a broken fence, a crayon, 2 blocks, 2 marbles, a zebra, and Spiderman, a goat, a cow, a tiger from the zoo, 9 police cars, 2 army guys and a fighter plane too, a jeep, a quad, 839, three 43's, 23,21, and a couple of trees.

While the intent of the “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 the materials can not do the job alone. The amount of the materials you offer is only a small piece of the overall picture. It is the way that the teachers and children utilize those materials to expand upon the child's interests, explore the unknown and discover/create fun new and exciting things to learn about.