

Who's That Stranger in the Classroom?

Parents may walk into their child's classroom and notice a stranger with a portable computer in the background. The stranger appears to be watching their entrance intently, or may be looking through the toys on the shelves or the books in the library area. They may wonder what's going on... it's nothing to cause alarm; it's just the Environment Rating Scale assessor paying a visit.

All child care centers and family child care homes participating in Pennsylvania's early learning initiatives such as Keystone STARS and PA Pre-K Counts use the nationally-recognized Environment Rating Scales (ERS) to guide and measure the quality of the early learning environment in an early learning classroom. The ERS provides different scales for infant-toddler, preschool, school age, and family care environments. Each scale assesses health and safety, building positive relationships with children and parents, and providing opportunities for learning and development.

Although all of these programs already have regulations and standards, the ERS goes one step further. Regulations are the law, minimum health and safety requirements below which no program should operate. Standards are goals and policies of the program. A process quality assessment such as the ERS actually provides a way to collect data of the day-to-day working of the environment. The ERS focuses on practice rather than policy, an actual "point in time."

Programs invite an ERS assessor in to view "a day in the life." Assessors enter the program on a day unknown to the teachers in a mutually determined month to spend half a day in a randomly-selected classroom. The assessor's goal is to blend into the background, watching but not interacting, so as not to impact the normal day. The assessor will listen carefully to conversations between teachers and parents, teachers and children, and between staff members. He or she will look at all of the activity areas and materials provided for children's play and learning, as well as observe health and safety routines. An interview with the teacher follows the observation period.

The report generated by the ERS assessor becomes a valuable tool for continuous quality improvement. Classroom teachers and site management can work together with local quality initiative partners, such as the regional Key and PA Pre-K Counts Specialists to establish improvement plans, thus insuring continuous quality improvement supporting positive child outcomes. The program also has written validation in areas where they have demonstrated exemplary care and learning opportunities. The scales provide a reliable and systemic strategy for improvement, reflection, and re-evaluation as a team.

The Environmental Rating Scale is just one tool for measuring and improving quality in all early childhood environments. When seeking quality in early care and education, look for a Keystone STARS or PA Pre-K Counts site, knowing that every day is high quality for programs effectively implementing STARS Standards and Pre-K Counts guidelines. Visit the PA Promise for Children website (www.papromiseforchildren.com) for more information about Pennsylvania's investment in quality early learning.