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## **Early Head Start Family Center of Portland**

### **Summary of Results from Peer Observations of Classroom Quality**

**Prepared for  
Early Head Start Family Center  
of Portland**

**Prepared by  
Beth Green, Ph.D.  
Jerod Tarte, M.A.**

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*Evaluation Director*

Beth Green, Ph.D.  
NPC Research, Inc.  
5200 SW Macadam Avenue, Ste. 420  
Portland, OR 97201  
(503) 243-2436  
Fax: (503) 243-2454  
E-mail: [green@npcresearch.com](mailto:green@npcresearch.com)

## **EHSFC CLASSROOM OBSERVATION RESULTS SPRING–SUMMER 2000**

**Goal:** One of the goals for the 1999–2000 evaluation team was to develop a procedure for EHSFC to engage in a peer-review process of their early childhood classrooms. Although originally the evaluators proposed having members of the evaluation team conduct the observations of the classrooms, it was decided that it would be a valuable learning process for center-based teachers to engage in a process of reflective observations focused on understanding environment quality.

The evaluation team met with all center-based specialists in March 2000 to train them to complete the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS, Harms, 1990). The ITERS is a widely used and well-validated measure of early childhood environment quality. Research has demonstrated that children being served in early childhood settings with higher scores on the ITERS demonstrate more positive developmental outcomes in a variety of areas (Harms, 1990). The ITERS is being used as part of the national evaluation of Early Head Start, and the preschool version of the ITERS, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), is currently being used for a national study of Head Start Quality (the FACES study). This preschool version was also used to assess the 3-year old classroom at EHSFC. Although the ITERS emphasizes concrete aspects of the environment (e.g., availability and variety of materials, furniture, frequency of activities, etc.) to a relatively greater extent than relational variables (such as quality of interactions between teachers and children), it is still clear that environmental variables represent an important component of the quality of early childhood services that is critical for healthy child development.

The ITERS consists of a total of 32 specific item domains, which have been grouped into 7 general areas:

- ITERS General Areas**

  - Physical Environment
  - Health, Nutrition, & Safety
  - Learning Activities
  - Classroom Management & Organization
  - Teacher-Child Interactions
  - Teacher-Parent Interactions
  - Adult Needs & Staff Issues

Each of the items is scored based on *what is observed* in the classroom. Typically, there is a range of 7–12 specific materials, behaviors, or events that can be observed for each item. Certain items also include questions for the teacher in cases where behavior or activities do not take place during the 2-hour observational period (for example, whether materials are rotated or changed, and if so, how often; certain classroom policies, etc.). Items and general area scores are rated as follows:

<b>ITERS Scoring Key</b>	
➤	1=Inadequate
➤	2=inadequate/minimal
➤	3=minimal
➤	4=minimal/good
➤	5=good
➤	6=good/excellent
➤	7=excellent

The training session emphasized the importance of rating the environments in a reliable and consistent manner. The evaluation team also continually reinforced the idea that the peer review process was being undertaken in the spirit of *continuous program improvement*. That is, the purpose was not to find fault with EHSFC teachers or their classrooms, but rather to identify areas of strength as well as areas that might need improvement to enhance the overall level of quality of services provided.

Teams of two teachers visited each classroom twice, and then one set of overall consensus ratings was provided to the evaluation team. Each visit lasted 1 ½-2 hours, and typically was scheduled within the same 2-week period. Observations occurred between late March and May 2000. Every classroom was observed, including the teen sites, although a few were only observed one time, because of scheduling difficulties.

## Results

All EHSFC classrooms were rated in the “good to excellent” range on the total classroom score for the observations:

	<b>EHSFC Classroom Scores</b>	<b>National HS Classroom Scores</b>
<b>Excellent:</b>	36%	1%
<b>Good-to-Excellent:</b>	55%	26%
<b>Good:</b>	9%	60%

Although comparison data for other *Early Head Start* programs is not yet available, national data on the quality of Head Start classrooms shows that most (60%) are in the “good” category, with only 26 percent in the “good to excellent” category, and less than 1 percent in the “excellent” category (FACES, 2000). **This suggests that the EHSFC is far above the national Head Start average in the quality of its early childhood environments.**

## STRENGTHS OF EHSFC CLASSROOMS

Areas in which all classrooms at the EHSFC was **especially strong**: almost all ratings were in the “excellent” category:

### **Physical Setting: Furnishings/Room Arrangement**

- Furnishings for routine care
- Furnishings for relaxation and comfort
- Room arrangement
- Use of furnishings for learning
- Books & pictures

### **Health, Nutrition, & Safety**

- Health Policy
- Safety Practices<sup>1</sup>
- Personal Grooming

### **Learning Activities**

- Eye-Hand Coordination
- Peer Interaction<sup>2</sup>

### **Classroom Management & Organization**

- Greeting/Departing
- Provisions for Special Needs Children

## **AREAS NEEDING POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS**

Below we present general areas in which **a few classrooms may need improvement** (i.e., many ratings in the “excellent” range, but 2–3 classrooms rated as “good” or below). A summary of this information is included in Appendix A.

### **Physical Environment**

- **Art:** The most frequent issue in this area was the lack of children’s art displayed at children’s eye level. Additionally, in some classrooms, the caregiver did not talk or discuss classroom art with children on a regular basis.
- **Display for Children:** Specifically, in a number of classrooms it did not appear that mobiles and visual displays were changed on a regular basis, scribble pictures or other children’s artwork was not displayed, or there were relatively few simple colorful photos or other works of art displayed at children’s eye level.

### **Nutrition, Health, & Safety**

- **Safety Policies:** By far, the most frequent issue in this area was the lack of competent substitutes who are familiar with individual children, classroom routines, and safety policies. A few classrooms also lacked posted safety policies.
- **Health Practices:** The most common issue related to health practice was the absence of health-related books, pictures, or materials. Several classrooms were also perceived as not making accommodations to meet sick children’s needs.
- **Meals/Snacks:** In one classroom, meal schedules were not perceived to meet children’s needs; in another, meals were seen as rushed. One classroom also had a concern with lack of hand-washing for finger-feeding children.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: One classroom was rated “inadequate/minimal”.

<sup>2</sup> Note: One classroom was rated “inadequate/minimal”

- **Diapering/Toileting:** In one classroom, parents were not informed (e.g., by written record of children's diapering/toileting; In two rooms, diapering/toileting not used as an opportunity to talk to children about personal care routines and self-help; in another classroom there was a lack of consistent washing of child's hands after diapering.

### Learning Activities & Materials

- **Active Play:** Specifically, in several classrooms it appeared that active play toys and equipment were not rotated on a regular basis, active play areas were somewhat crowded, active play equipment was not used on a daily basis; or outdoor play areas were not convenient or did not allow appropriate separation of younger infants and toddlers from older children.
- **Music & Movement:** Specifically, in several classrooms music toys were not rotated on a regular basis.
- **Blocks:** For a few classroom there was a lack of blocks and accessories; in others, blocks requiring supervision were not used 3 or more times per week.
- **Sand and Water Play:** In a few classrooms, sand or water play was not available 3 or more times per week (daily for older children).
- **Pretend Play:** The most frequent concern was a lack of pretend play materials that could be used outdoors.
- **Cultural Awareness:** The most frequent issues were: lack of pictures or display of people from infancy to old age, absence of pictures displaying men and women/boys and girls engaged in non-traditional role activities; and, lack of cultural representation in broad array of activities.

### Classroom Organization & Management

- **Schedule of Daily Activities:** The most frequent issue within this area was the lack of available written schedules.

### Teacher-Child Interactions

- **Informal Use of Language:** In several classrooms, caregivers were not seen as maintaining a balance between listening and talking. In one classroom, caregiver wasn't perceived as promoting child's language development by repeating new words, etc.
- **Caregiver-Child Interaction:** In two classrooms, caregivers were seen as not always being sensitive to children's feelings and reactions (e.g., not warning or talking to baby before picking him/her up). In one classroom, responsibility for a small number of children was not assigned to one primary caregiver. In another, the caregiver was seen as spending uneven amounts of time with different children (e.g., favoritism).

- ***Supervision of Children's Activities:*** In one classroom, there was insufficient caregiver supervision to satisfy routine care needs; in another, the caregiver was perceived as "hovering" (e.g., not maintaining a balance between child's exploration and caregiver support). In another room, caregiver was seen as unable to supervise the whole group of children while working with one child or a smaller group. One caregiver was also seen as not providing supervision to support children's learning needs (e.g., unable to offer individualized activities to promote learning).
- ***Discipline:*** In one classroom, the caregiver was not seen as actively helping children to avoid conflict. In another, discipline was seen as so lax as that there was little order or control.

### **Teacher-Parent Interactions**

- There were a few issues related to communication with parents, including in one classroom, parents not being informed of child's diapering/toileting and parents not given specific information about how the day went. In a few classrooms, written schedules not available.

### **Adult Needs & Staff Issues**

- ***Staff Cooperation.*** The most frequent issue in this area was a lack of center-sponsored activities to promote positive staff interactions, such as social events or group participation in professional development activities.
- ***Adult Personal Needs:*** The lack of a separate, furnished adult lounge with comfortable adult-sized furniture was perceived by some teachers as a concern.



***Appendix A***  
***Summary of Results***

## Specific ITERS Domains Strengths & Areas In Need of Possible Improvements

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Excellent</i>	<i>Possible Improvements Needed</i>	<i>Primary Issues</i>
<b>Physical Environment</b>			
Furnishings for routine care	X		
Furnishings for relaxation	X		
Room Arrangement	X		
Use of furnishings for learning	X		
Books & pictures	X		
Art (display)		X	lack of materials at eye level more frequent rotation
Display for children		X	lack of materials at eye level more frequent rotation
Cultural awareness (display)		X	elements absent (e.g., pictures portraying non traditional male/female roles, age groups)

<b><i>Domain</i></b>	<b><i>Excellent</i></b>	<b><i>Possible Improvements Needed</i></b>	<b><i>Primary Issues</i></b>
<b>Health, Nutrition, &amp; Safety</b>			
Health Policy	X		
Safety Practices	X		
Personal Grooming	X		
Health Practices		X	lack of health-related books, pictures, materials
Safety Policy		X	lack of competent substitutes familiar w/children & routines
Meals/Snacks		X	some meals rushed lack of flexible scheduling to meet individual children's needs
Diapering Toileting			need to use diapering/toileting as learning opportunity for child need consistency in washing child's hands after diapering

<b><i>Domain</i></b>	<b><i>Excellent</i></b>	<b><i>Possible Improvements Needed</i></b>	<b><i>Primary Issues</i></b>
<b>Learning Activities</b>			
Eye-Hand Coordination	X		
Peer Interaction	X		
Active Play		X	more frequent rotation outdoor play infrequent or inconvenient
Music & Movement		X	more frequent rotation
Blocks		X	lack of accessible blocks infrequent use of blocks requiring supervision
Sand & Water Play		X	not available 3 or more times/week
Pretend Play		X	lack of materials for outdoor use
Cultural Awareness (activities)		X	lack of cultural representation in broad array of activities

<b><i>Domain</i></b>	<b><i>Excellent</i></b>	<b><i>Possible Improvements Needed</i></b>	<b><i>Primary Issues</i></b>
<b>Classroom Management &amp; Organization</b>			
Greeting/Departing	X		
Provisions for Special Needs Children	X		
Schedule of Daily Activities		X	Lack of written daily schedules
<b>Teacher Child Interactions</b>			
Informal Use of Language		X	maintaining a balance between listening and talking
Caregiver-Child Interaction		X	sensitivity to child's needs (e.g., talk to baby before picking up)
Supervision of Children's Activities		X	variable (different needs in different classrooms)
Discipline		X	variable (different needs in different classrooms)

<b><i>Domain</i></b>	<b><i>Excellent</i></b>	<b><i>Possible Improvements Needed</i></b>	<b><i>Primary Issues</i></b>
<b>Teacher-Parent Interactions</b>		X	lack of communication about child's day with parents
<b>Adult &amp; Staff Issues</b>			
Staff Cooperation		X	more center-sponsored recreational/social activities for staff
Adult Personal Needs		X	need for convenient, comfortable adult lounge (some sites)