

Q is for **Quality Early Care and Education**

Identifying Quality Experiences for Young Children

Quality early care and education experiences do not only occur in classrooms, but also in homes and community settings. Rather than referring to quality in a global sense, early childhood specialists often break quality down into two categories: process and structural. Process quality involves the relationships and experiences children have in their everyday activities and routines. Structural quality includes the objects, materials, and safe spaces available for learning. In a group learning setting, structural quality also reflects small child-to-adult ratios to enable supportive interactions and meaningful learning experiences. Listed below are ways adults can identify process and structural qualities in an early care and education setting.

Identifying Quality Early Care and Education Settings

Here are seven qualities to look for in an early care and education setting.

Structural Qualities

1. The 3R's of Early Learning: Relationships, Repetition, Routines

Quality early care and education must include the 3R's of Early Learning: Relationships, Repetition, Routines. You should see adults engaging in frequent back-and-forth interactions with young children, repeated positive experiences, and predictable and engaging activities and routines.

2. Experiences appropriate for a child's age, stage of development, and culture

In early childhood, experiences appropriate for a child's age, stage of development, and culture are known as developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). When observing an early care and education classroom, home, or community setting, consider whether the activities and routines you see are appropriate for your child's age, stage of development, and culture.

3. Strong family-professional partnerships

Consistent expectations, activities, and supports for children in all the different settings they live and learn contribute to quality early care and education experiences. Research shows when families and professionals work together as partners, everyone benefits. You should see evidence of strong family-professional partnerships and frequent two-way communication between professionals and families.



Process Qualities

4. Safe spaces for children to learn

For young children, it is essential that their physical and emotional needs are monitored and acknowledged so that all children feel safe and supported in the learning setting. Look for a high-quality early care and education environment that exhibits the following physically and emotionally safe spaces.

Safe Spaces in Quality Early Care

Physical Safety

- Ensure adequate physical space is available for children to crawl, sit, stand, or play. Look to see that the physical space is safe and any potential safety issues are addressed (e.g., caps in plugs, no hanging cords from blinds).
- Ask about the numbers of children and adults in the setting and the adult-child ratios. Guidance about adult-child ratios by age can be found here.
- Ensure outdoor areas are fenced or protected from street traffic and places where children play outside are safe. Play equipment should be in good repair.
- Ask if the early care and education setting is licensed or has other certifications (sometimes referred to as accreditation).

Emotional Safety

- Ensure adults in the setting support children to recognize and express their emotions appropriately and without scolding or using harsh words (e.g., instead of “Don’t cry”, say, “Are you feeling sad?”).
- For toddlers and preschoolers, ensure adults in the setting model how children can use friendship, sharing, and problem-solving skills.
- Ensure adults in the setting recognize and respond to children’s communication and engage in positive exchanges. For toddlers and preschoolers, adults should be engaging children in short conversations, building on their interests and focus of attention.
- For toddlers and preschoolers, ensure adults in the setting offer children choices and support them by recognizing their accomplishments.

5. Appropriate and interesting materials

Access to safe, engaging, and developmentally appropriate materials is essential for child development and learning. Look for age-appropriate and culturally relevant toys, books, and learning materials such as crayons, paint, and paper, as well as sturdy and interesting toys that support play and exploration.

6. Adults who understand and continue to learn about child development and learning

Children’s success in a learning environment depends on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the adults. It is essential that early childhood practitioners and other adults in the lives of children have opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills so they can provide a nurturing and supportive learning environment for young children. A skilled and qualified adult has the ability to connect with each child and tailor learning opportunities to meet their needs.

7. Diverse early childhood experiences

While consistency is important in supporting children’s development and learning, novel and diverse enrichment experiences are also important. Local parks, libraries, and museums often have programs designed specifically to support meaningful interactions among adults and children that support early learning. Planned trips to participate in these community programs expand children’s experiences and provide opportunities to learn new vocabulary and engage in social interactions with other children and adults.

What We Are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators are helping families and practitioners identify quality early care and education settings and support community programs that foster these quality early learning experiences.

Visit our website to access more information or resources and learn more about what we are doing.

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