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Fall 2003 | Volume 7 #2

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CHOOSING A CHILD CARE CENTER is one of the most important decisions parents make for their young children. Not only is the child's immediate well-being at stake, studies have shown that the quality of care children receive in a prekindergarten setting affects their outcomes in kindergarten and beyond. Too often, however, parents select child care centers based largely on matters of convenience (closeness to home or work, accommodating hours), appearance or the recommendations of friends.

Over the past 25 years, FPG has developed a series of rating scales that provide a detailed assessment of the child care environment, including such factors as space and furnishings, personal care routines, language/reasoning activities and staff training and competency. Four states, including North Carolina, use these scales as the base for a rating system of licensed child care centers. North Carolina uses a star system, granting one to five stars based on the level of quality. A look at one family's experience provides an example for how the rating system can facilitate the informed choice of a child care center.

Alison and Andy Duncan found in June 2001 that they would be having a baby. Typical of many young couples, they lead busy lives: Andy is a graduate student at Duke University and Alison is a graphic designer. Although they intended to start seeking out child care options during the summer, fall rolled around and they still had not visited centers.

Fortunately, Duke University maintained a web site that listed child care options in the area, including their rating according to North Carolina's five-star system. A connecting web site explained what the star ratings meant.

"We used the star system primarily as a means for deciding which centers to visit," Alison says. "It helped us rule out many centers, because we made the unspoken decision to try to stick with centers of four stars or more."

Andy and Alison contacted approximately eight child care centers by phone, and with the advice of friends with young children in child care, they narrowed their selection down to four. The couple visited each center, focusing on the infant rooms (they planned to put their son in child care at three months of age), but also visiting the toddler and preschool rooms.

"For older rooms, we mainly looked for structured activities, attentiveness of the teachers/caregivers and the comfort and complacency of the children," Alison says. "Our attention to the infant rooms was much greater. I considered, 'Does the room look and feel comfortable? What are the caregivers' attitudes? How do they interact with the children? What is their experience? Are they not only experienced with baby care, but are they *nice people*? Are they OK with unannounced parent visits? Is the room clean? What steps do they take to prevent the passing of germs? Is the sleeping area safe and within sight of the teachers? Are the children safe and comfortable? What is the teacher-to-child ratio?'"

The Duncan's were most impressed with the one five-star center they visited, but that center did not have any open spaces. They chose a four-star center and have been happy with their decision.

"We found that the rating system matched up pretty well with what we observed in our site visits," Andy says.

"The center we chose has definitely stood up to its four-star rating. Eliot has been very happy there."

Based on their experience, the Duncans strongly endorse the use of a rating system to help parents narrow down their search of child care options. Beyond that, they have several recommendations.

"Visit centers that you are interested in several times and at different times of day," Alison says. "The first time we visited our child care center, it was early morning, and the children had just arrived. They hadn't really had a chance to begin playing yet, so we didn't see the child-to-child interaction and activities we wanted to see. The merits of this center brought us back for a second look, and this time we visited later in the day. What a difference! The older babies were playing with each other, toys were spread out, and some children were in a circle with the teacher."

"Second and third visits give you the opportunity to catch details you missed on your first trip," Alison adds. "When you've narrowed down your choices, you can really fine tune what you're looking for."

Rating systems for child care centers are a new phenomenon in this country. While the public sees only the end product of the rating process, reflected in such tools as North Carolina's five-star rating, the scales used to rate classrooms are the result of an impressive amount of research and development. In this issue we trace the history and development of the FPG rating scales and feature some of the ways information about program quality is being used today. [led](#)

A Whole New



Yardstick

Though they were initially designed to allow teachers, administrators and supervisors to better assess the quality of child care centers, ECERS (*Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale*) and its companion scales have become valuable tools for research in the field of early childhood care and education. ECERS has been used in at least half-a-dozen major studies here and abroad, as well as numerous small studies. Indeed, ECERS provides researchers with a means of measuring quality that didn't exist before their creation.

Developing the Scales

Researchers have confidence in ECERS as an assessment tool in large part because the scale itself was developed and continues to be refined through a combination of solid research and direct work with practitioners in the field. The first version of the scale was developed in the mid-1970s by FPG investigators Thelma Harms and Dick Clifford. The scale was based on a checklist of items for improving the quality of environments in early childhood classrooms that Harms had compiled during her nearly 20 years of teaching and observation (see *A Giant in Her Field*, page 12).

Recognizing the need for more systematic and reliable ways of assessing program quality, Harms and Clifford developed a series of items based on Harms' earlier checklist focusing more comprehensively on quality issues. They then asked a group of county child care coordinators from across North Carolina to test the items in actual child care settings. With the coordinators' feedback, the FPG researchers made additions and modifications to the various items. Harms and Clifford then sent this modified list to a number of nationally recognized early childhood experts, asking them to review it for relevance and

importance. The scale was finalized and published as a field-test edition by FPG in 1978.

Two years of field testing followed, documenting the ability of trained observers to use the instrument reliably in typical early childhood settings. Harms and Clifford trained a team of students to use the scale and sent them out to assess a selected group of early childhood centers in North Carolina. Pairs of observers conducted assessments and compared the results to check for degree of conformity. Six weeks later, the same centers were assessed again to determine the stability of the measure of the environment.

Finally, Clifford and Harms solicited a team of independent experts to visit 30 early childhood programs in North Carolina and rate them according to the general aspects addressed in the rating scale. FPG researchers then rated those programs with the actual scale. The experts' assessments compared well with the scale ratings of these programs. Satisfied with the reliability and validity of the measurement device, the authors published the first version of ECERS (Teachers College Press) in 1980.

ECERS divides the early childhood environment into seven areas or sub-scales: Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language-Reasoning, Activities, Interaction, Program Structure, and Parents and Staff. Within these seven areas, specific items, such as availability of

books and pictures, are scored according to their adequacy.

Under each item, relevant indicators of quality (e.g., very few books accessible) are scored either yes or no. Assessors total their scores in each of these sub-scales to provide a numerical profile of the early childhood environment.

ECERS has been designed such that it captures an accurate picture of the total classroom environment. “We are often asked if people can’t ‘fake it’ when they know we are coming,” Clifford says. “The answer is ‘no.’ They might be able to fake it for the first 30–40 minutes, but the assessment takes 3–4 hours, during which time people inevitably resort to their normal way of doing things.”

Substantial revisions were made for the most current edition of ECERS, published in 1998 as ECERS-R with Debby Cryer as co-author. Separate versions of the scale designed specifically for infant-toddler settings (ITERS), family child care (FDCRS), and school-aged programs (SACERS) have been developed to provide similar means of assessing a wide variety of settings for young children. ITERS was co-authored with Debby Cryer, and SACERS with Ellen Vineberg Jacobs and Donna Romano.

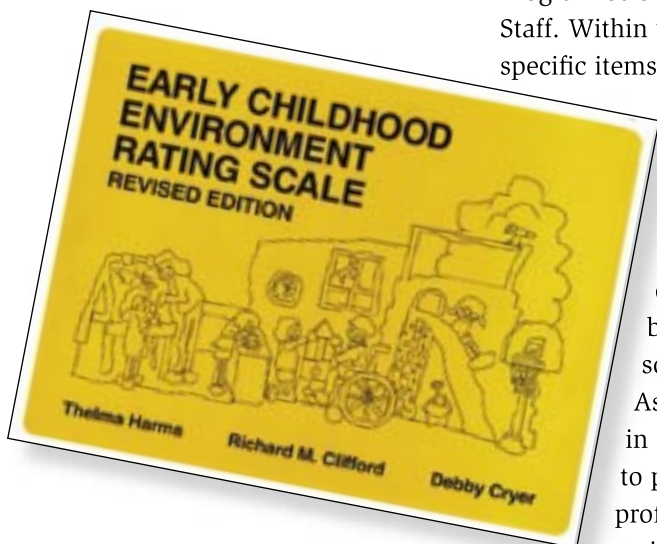
Research with the Scales

Because ECERS has been so thoroughly researched and field tested, professionals feel confident using it as an assessment tool for all manner of research. In 1993, FPG researchers used ECERS to rate the quality of child care centers in four states as part of the Cost-Quality-Outcomes Study. This study was conducted with colleagues at the University of Colorado at Denver, University of California at Los Angeles and Yale University. The study examined over 400 randomly selected early childhood centers in four states chosen to represent the diversity of child care provisions in the nation.

“This study raised big questions about the quality of child care in the US, especially for children under age three,” Clifford says.

“Nearly 40 percent of the infant-toddler classrooms we studied were of poor quality, potentially compromising children’s basic health and safety. Only 8 percent were good quality, what we would consider to be providing developmentally appropriate practices. While the quality was higher for preschoolers, it was not what we felt was needed for America’s youngest citizens. That study was reported in almost every major newspaper in the US and is still the most quoted study about child care in America.”

That study has spurred action on a variety of fronts. Many states have used the results to argue for more stringent regulation of early childhood programs. New approaches to licensing with differentiations based on ratings of quality have been developed because the tools existed to make such distinctions. Additional funding has been made available to help support the higher quality desired.



In 2003, FPG released the results of a long-term evaluation of the Smart Start Initiative in North Carolina. Smart Start is a highly acclaimed program aimed at making high quality early childhood services available to all children who need it. The newly released study shows that early childhood programs that are actively involved in Smart Start had higher quality than other programs, and that the programs with higher quality had a positive impact on children's performance.

"The fact that they were able to demonstrate this change is huge," Clifford says. "It clearly demonstrates that if a state is willing to invest in raising quality on a large scale basis, it can indeed make significant improvements across the board."

Ongoing research at FPG using the scales includes a Continuity of Care study, which is following the progress of very young children who have the same teacher for three years versus those who move to different teachers at least once a year.

Clifford is the first to admit that ECERS is not the perfect assessment tool. "Research has not identified specific factors about the child care environment that are more important than others," he says. "The factors are all intertwined, and it's extremely difficult to tease out the effects of any one over another."

Still, Clifford takes satisfaction in helping to produce a measurement device that simply did not exist beforehand. "Looking at the progress of society over time, the invention of

new ways of measuring things has been hugely important," he says. "In its own little way, ECERS has contributed by giving people who run child care and other early childhood programs a new tool to use in their work, a way to think differently about what they do." | **ed** |

To learn more

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