

Tips for Using the School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS-U)

This ERS tip sheet was created to assist you with some common areas of clarification around the SACERS-U. Every observation is different, so remember that these are guidelines to support your assessments. Remember to use each item's *Notes for Clarification* section and to look at the ERSI website (<http://ersi.info/>) for updated *Additional Notes* frequently.

- **Be sure all materials for children are age-appropriate.** The ages of the children in the group are a key factor in deciding appropriateness. Materials should: vary by ability, age and interest; be challenging, but not frustrating for children to use; send positive social messages; and be safe. Appropriateness includes content that is not violent, sexually explicit or biased toward any group.
- **Be sure that materials in the program are accessible.** To be considered accessible, children must be able to get the materials easily by themselves. If materials are stored in closed spaces, they can be considered accessible only if it is observed that children can freely access and use the materials when allowed. This access must be provided as part of the usual daily (or almost daily) practice. In addition, at the good level, materials must be accessible for at least 30 minutes in the typical three hour after-school program.
- **Be sure there are interest centers with a clearly defined purpose.** An interest center is a place where materials are arranged for use within an appropriately equipped play space. Centers should promote independent use by children. For example, an art interest center would have art materials near easels or tables. If homework is part of the program, a quiet space with suitable furniture should be provided.
- **Remember that a variety of gross motor activities must stimulate at least five different skills.** In the good level of quality there must be a minimum of two skills that are made possible by stationary equipment and a minimum of two skills that are made possible by portable equipment; however, a total of five skills are necessary to receive credit for all of the indicators in the good level. Therefore, one additional skill must be present in either stationary or portable equipment. For example, if children have access to a stationary climber with a slide, a ladder and a tunnel (three skills), as well as a hula hoop and a jump rope (two skills), they have a variety of equipment that stimulates many skills.
- **Children should have access to a variety of music and movement activities.** Music materials (e.g., dance props, CDs, musical instruments) and activities should be accessible daily. To be considered accessible, children should be able to use the tape/CD player independently.
- **Remember to provide opportunities for dramatic play.** Teachers should provide a variety of props which support many roles and situations, and add to the children's possibilities for dramatic play. For example, if the dramatic play is very active, they might provide children with a larger space. Or if children need more props, teachers might help them find what they need. Also, materials that are of interest to both boys and girls must be provided.
- **Remember to participate and encourage reading/language activities.** Teachers should be responsive or participate with children involved in language games. They could play the game with children or help set up the game. Teachers should also encourage children to use reading or writing for practical situations, such as writing a letter to friends or looking up instructions online.
- **Be sure to include science/nature activities.** Science/nature books should be used to extend children's information about science. A book could be used to answer a science question or it could be open and placed next to natural objects which are described in the book. Children should be given the opportunity to care for living things. They should also have opportunities to observe nature for extended periods of time.
- **Remember to engage the children in meaningful conversations.** Conversations should be encouraging, informative, and relevant to children. There should be several turns for the teachers and children to listen and talk. Try to find opportunities to ask children open-ended questions such as why and how questions, which encourage longer more complex responses.

- **Keep in mind that an outdoor area should be used for gross motor activities daily year-round, weather permitting.** In Illinois the term “weather permitting” means temperatures between 25 and 90 degrees, taking into consideration the wind chill. For example, if the temperature is 30 degrees, but 18 degrees with the wind chill factored in, it is not expected that children have outdoor play time.
- **Be sure to take advantage of community resources that are available to the program.** Field trips out of the center should be taken regularly. In Illinois “regularly scheduled” means that there is a field trip every quarter. This means that there must be a couple of field trips during the school year (which can be on days when children are not in school) and a couple of trips during the summer.
- **Be aware of potential outdoor safety hazards.** For a basic overview of playground guidelines and safety information, please visit the Environment Rating Scales Website: http://www.ersi.info/ecers_supmaterials.html Click on “playground guidelines.” If the playground has a poured or installed foam or rubber surface, site-specific documentation must be provided to verify that ASTM F1292 requirements are met.

Source: Harms, T., Jacobs, H., & Romano, D. (2014). *School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale*. New York: Teachers College.