

ECERS-3: Space and Furnishings

ITEM 1: INDOOR SPACE

Question: Can you explain the difference between “space is accessible to all children and adults currently using the classroom” (at three level) and “space is accessible to children and adults with disabilities” (at seven level)?

Answer: The confusion may be due to the fact that for Space and Furnishings, 1. Indoor Space, indicator 3.5 allows a score of yes if there are no people with disabilities that require special provisions in the program. However, 7.2 takes into consideration all space – the facility, gross motor spaces, and classroom.

Item 7.2 says, “Space is accessible to children and adults with disabilities” (Ex: ramps and handrails for people needing them; access for wheelchairs and walkers; push-plate doorbell instead of small button).

This indicator requires that space is accessible to all children and adults with disabilities requiring special access, even if no children or adult with disabilities are enrolled in the program.

The notes on page 14 go on to give specific physical requirements such as the width of doorways must be 32 inches, door handles easily operated with lever or push bar, and threshold of the door no more than ½ inch high. If more than ¼ inch, it must be beveled in order to allow a wheelchair to roll over it easily. Entryways to access the facility must be handicapped accessible, for example, having an easy-to-reach push plate to open the door or a push plate doorbell in addition to keypads that limit access to the building.

Question: Is a door that leads to the hallway enough to provide appropriate ventilation in the classroom?

Answer: This item has to do with windows that can be opened or a fan that can be controlled. It has to do with fresh air and control of cooling. A door alone is not sufficient to count towards ventilation. If the temperature can be controlled only from another location (e.g., thermostat), it depends on whether the air in the room is fresh.

ITEM 2: FURNISHINGS FOR CARE, PLAY, AND LEARNING

Question: Would a small plastic stool be an acceptable substitution for a chair?

Answer: In general, programs should purchase child-sized chairs to meet the requirements of furnishings for care, play, and learning for ECERS-3. However, classrooms will receive credit, as long as stools allow children to sit securely and otherwise meet the requirement for child-sized chairs.

At 5.1, ECERS-3 notes state, "If the program allows 17 children in the classroom at one time, but there are 15 children currently present and only 15 chairs in the room, score No." (p. 16). This means that there must be at least one child-sized chair for each child present in the classroom.

At 5.2, at least 75% of chairs must be child-sized, such that when sitting back in the chair, feet touch floor, knees fit comfortably under the table, table tops are at about elbow height.

Question: When can cloth bags be used in cubbies?

Answer: Whether in the hall or classroom, simple hooks with a shelf above them qualify for credit for 3.1, but not for 5.1. "At this level, reusable bags and hooks cannot be given credit, only cubbies. Reusable bags or hooks are not considered furniture."

Question: May clear, stackable, oversized drawers be used for children to use instead of cubbies?

Answer: Drawers would be considered "some space to store possessions," but are not considered cubbies/furniture at 5.1. Hooks and/or drawers would receive credit at 3.1, but not at higher levels.

From a practical standpoint, with Illinois weather, drawers are not a good choice for damp or wet clothing. From an ECERS-3 standpoint, classrooms should provide furniture/cubbies for clothing and personal item storage. If cubbies are divided, they must be wide and deep enough to hold all children's belongings without touching. Whether cubbies are located in the classroom or hallway, they must be ample.

At the minimum level, each child needs some space to store their possessions – hooks, reusable bags, or cubbies (even if one cubby is shared by two children) to receive credit. For instance, 18 children are enrolled, and nine double hooks are provided to store children's belongings, or if there are 18 hooks, and each child's possessions are hung in a cloth bag.

Indicator 3.1: For this indicator, there should be enough cubbies or hooks for the number of children *currently enrolled in the classroom – not the classroom capacity*.

A cloth bag hung on a hook would be given credit with or without a cubby, because the hung cloth bag would be considered “some place to store personal possessions” (p. 17). However, a garbage bag under any circumstances is not allowed as it poses a safety hazard, and it would not be appropriate.

At higher levels of quality, reusable bags and hooks cannot be given credit, only cubbies. Indicator 5.1 requires appropriate *furnishings* to store children’s belongings without touching, and reusable bags or hooks are not considered furniture

Indicator 5.1: For this indicator, there should be enough *furniture for the maximum amount of children allowed at one time – the classroom capacity – and not on the current enrollment.*

Indicator 7.1: All requirements for level 5 must be met. Additionally, cubbies must be located in the classroom, not in the hallway. We understand that programs may have hook systems in the hallway. We encourage program staff to have and use ECERS-3 information when considering options for children’s clothing and item storage.

Question: May open-wire storage areas be used instead of typical cubbies? Are wall shelves with hooks appropriate?

Answer: For the open-wire storage shelves, see information on page 17 for #2 – Furnishings for care, play, and learning at level 3.1. The language states that there must be enough furniture for routine care, play, and learning (Ex: each child has *some place* to store personal possessions; enough shelves for toys, books, and other materials) (ECERS-3, p. 17). The open-wire storage unit shown in the photo would receive credit as *some place* to store personal possessions at 3.1.

Programs should provide the higher-quality environment described at the 5 and 7 levels. At 5.1, furnishings required include: “Ample furniture for routine care, play, and learning (Ex: children’s possessions stored *without items touching those of another...*”). The additional notes on page 16 elaborate what is needed. “When considering children’s storage space, if cubbies are not large enough to hold winter coats, but it is summer, and no coats are used, this would not be scored as acceptable if the children’s possessions would touch once coats were added.” For this reason, the open-wire storage unit shown would not receive credit at 5.1.

For the wall shelf, hooks, and bags at the minimal level (3.1), reusable plastic bags and hooks can be given credit. However, cloth bags are never appropriate. (Note that at level 3.1, ten regular cubbies with two hooks in each will also be given credit as “some place” to store personal possessions.)

For the wall shelf at level 5.1, reusable bags and hooks *cannot* be given credit.

In general, enough cubbies must be provided for the maximum number of children allowed at the same time. If cubbies are divided (typically these have hooks on opposite sides of the cubby), these must be wide and deep enough to hold all children belongings without touching.

Question: Would cubbies located in a closet of a classroom be considered “convenient” assuming that the closet door is always open for children to go in and out as needed?

Answer: If the closet is part of the classroom, the cubbies are mounted onto the wall, and nothing is blocking children’s access to reach their personal possessions, this arrangement might be okay. However, it is not clear what is meant by “closet.” If this is a separate room adjacent but visible to the classroom and teachers can easily supervise children, it might be okay. If the door is attached and it cannot be closed by children - and teachers do not need to supervise children when walking in and out of the closet, it might be okay. On the other hand, if the door can be closed by children, or if each time a child wants to get something from a cubby, they must ask a teacher, this would not be considered convenient.

Question: Is having an art easel in a classroom a requirement? Item 2, indicator 5.3 lists an art easel as an example, but not as a requirement.

Answer: In each classroom, we recommend programs invest in at least one easel and aim to have several easels available. If a cabinet or wall is used to conduct art activities, and paper, paint, and paint brushes are set up for children’s use, these items would count as one type of specific art material in item 18. However, these do not take the place of an easel.

If a program has an easel, and it is set up for children’s use, meaning there is an appropriate drawing surface and drawing tools, this provides credit for a specialized piece of furniture and for one type of an art material (item 18, 3.1 & 5.1).

For item 2, indicators 5.3 and 7.2, the scale does not specify what type of specialized furniture a classroom must have. Some of the examples we received from the authors include the following: an art easel, housekeeping furniture, a sand/water table, a bookshelf, and so on. At level 5, a program needs two different pieces, and at level 7, at least three. The use of a cabinet as an easel does not meet the criteria.

Question: What are the five required centers in ECERS-3?

Answer: Look for the definition on page 11 at #5 and more specific information on page 18 about interest centers and types. The scale mentions five specific interest centers that are listed below:

- Item 3, 5.2: Cozy area (additional note p. 18)
- Item 15, 5.3: Reading interest center (additional note p. 42)
- Item 20, 5.3: Block interest center (additional note p. 52)
- Item 21, 5.2: Dramatic play interest center (additional note p. 54)
- Item 22, 5.1: Nature/science interest center (additional note p. 56)

ITEM 3: ROOM ARRANGEMENT FOR PLAY AND LEARNING

Question: What is the difference between a play area and an interest center?

Answer: “A play area is a space where play materials are provided for children to use. Interest centers are more specific, clearly distinguished types of play areas” (ECERS-3, pg. 11).

To qualify as an interest center, the following must be present:

- Materials must be organized by type and stored so that they are accessible to the children without any difficulty.
- Furniture must be provided for the use of the materials.
- A sufficient amount of space for the type of play and the number of children allowed at the same time (especially dramatic and block play).
- If one or two materials are located in a specific interest center, but they do not interfere with space or the intent of the interest center, credit may be given. However, if in any way they interfere, then credit is given for a play area only.
- Interest centers should not share space. It should be obvious what kind of play is encouraged by a particular area. Children must understand the intent of an interest center.

Question: Is a sand table considered an interest center?

Answer: A sand/water table cannot be an interest center since it is a part of a nature/science area. This is the 4th category that can count for Science in 22, 3.1, 3.3., and 5.1. When a classroom has a sand/water table, they may get credit for item #2, 5.3 or 7.2 and item #22, 3.3 and 3.1 or 5.1. In addition, a sand/water table is considered a type of specialized furniture for item 2, indicators 5.3 and 7.2.

“Nature/science materials” include (1) living things the children can observe closely or care for (house plants, pets, an outside garden); (2) natural objects (bird’s nest; leaves; insects in transparent plastic; rocks; seashells; collection of seeds); (3) at least 5 factual books/nature-science picture games; (4) tools (magnifying glasses; magnets) and (5) sand or water with toys (measuring cups; digging tools and containers).

Question: Are the centers required to be labeled with the standards?

Answer: No specific requirements are present in ECERS-3 that suggest that Illinois Early Learning Guidelines/Standards should be written at centers. These should be used for lesson planning, as anchors for formative assessment, and to facilitate conversations with children and families about concepts, themes, and priorities for learning during the pre-K year.

ECERS-3 does not present standards and should not be understood as presenting standards for quality. It also is not a checklist for quality and should not be used as a checklist. ECERS-3 provides a shared lens through which we can evaluate where programs are in continuous quality improvement.

This is an important shared understanding, as the feedback we provide in CQI reports can be used to facilitate conversation and action steps towards ongoing growth. The most important aspects of quality are the way teachers facilitate language and higher-level learning concepts throughout the day and across structures and settings. You can see this priority reflected in ECERS-3.

Question: When children independently take an item from one area to another does that affect Interest Area? I believe you mentioned prior it would be based on what is observed. For example, if they take a block from the block area to create a cell phone in dramatic play as long as the purpose of play is still be carried out, it will be okay but if they bring a material in that takes over or alters the type of play.

Answer: In general, programs need to evaluate amounts of materials to match the play interests and developmental needs of children in that particular classroom. Typically, high-quality programs exceed the needed amounts of materials and do not simply aim to reach the number provided by ECERS-3. ECERS-3 provides a minimum required number of materials.

There should be ample materials in interest centers such that the removal of one item (or several items) does not impact accessibility for all remaining other children. The removal of one game, one puzzle, one science material, two books, etc. should not impact accessibility for the many materials remaining for other children. When there are ample materials in each area, then credit for an interest center would not be lost if a child took a material to play alone or with a friend.

When a child takes a block and uses it as a phone, of course, this is fine. When a child removes many blocks to build a large structure in the dramatic play area, then credit for dramatic play as an interest center would be lost.

Question: Do the interest centers that require tables also require chairs?

Answer: Chairs are needed with tables in art, science, math, and dramatic play. If materials are present on tables, children would need chairs to use the materials. If books are placed on a table as part of the reading center, chairs are needed. If there is a writing center, chairs are needed.

ITEM 4: SPACE FOR PRIVACY

Question: May an easel be considered a space for privacy?

Answer: A place where one or two children can play protected from intrusion by others is considered a space for privacy. The notes on page 20 (ECERS-3) state that an easel in a busy art center is not a space for privacy. An easel must be placed in a protected area without any other interruptions to qualify as a space for privacy. A space for privacy should be set up formally and intentionally by staff to encourage children to play alone or be alone. For this reason, it is not likely that an easel would be considered a privacy area unless it was specifically planned for that purpose. If other children move through the same space (used as a traffic lane or play area or art area), it would not be considered a place for privacy.

ITEM 5: CHILD-RELATED DISPLAY

Question: Can you describe child-related display and how teachers should talk about displays?

Answer: The content and conversation about child-related display will vary depending on a particular indicator. Descriptions include “display materials,” “display materials relating to the current interest of children,” and “individualized artwork.”

- Display materials include a calendar, weather chart, posters, pictures of children in the group, positive examples of diversity in displayed pictures, print numbers accompanied by pictures clearly showing what the numbers mean, print accompanied by pictures. Display materials relating to a current theme include pictures of a recent field trip or activity paintings of fall, and so on.

There are many ways to talk about display in formal and informal conversation.

- Informal conversation, staff can talk about the calendar, weather chart, or classroom jobs during teaching times.
- During an informal conversation, staff may point out a child’s artwork and discuss it with the child, point out displayed hand-washing steps and guide children through them, or point out a print numeral and show how many fingers the number represents.

The type of conversation is described in the ECERS-3 indicators. Of course, staff will want to aim for the highest level of quality:

- 3.3: The indicator is met when staff talks about any display (e.g., during whole-group, free play, or routines) during the observation. Examples include the calendar, weather chart, artwork, or posters.
- 5.4: Staff must talk about display at least two times during free play and/or routines. Whole-group time does not count toward 5.4. Examples during routines include posted menus during snack or

handwashing displays. Some teachers use attendance picture pocket charts at arrival that meet 5.4. During free play, anything displayed that is talked about meets this indicator.

- 7.2: One instance needs to be observed of staff holding an informal conversation with a child about a display. This must meet the definition of a conversation to meet the indicator. A conversation is defined as exchanges of back and forth dialogue between the teacher and child about the displayed material. Staff may hold a conversation with children about displayed family photos, photos of a field trip, or children’s artwork.
- 7.3: Staff must point and read the words in a display. This can take place in a group setting or free play.

ITEM 6: SPACE FOR GROSS MOTOR PLAY

Question: How close together should protective bollards be placed?

Answer: Programs must be sure that structural bollards can prevent a vehicle from entering the space where children play either accidentally or purposefully. Bollards must be placed close enough – no more than 42 in. apart from each other – given their weight and anchoring depth to prevent vehicle entry in all circumstances. It is the school’s responsibility to ensure child safety.

The general guidelines are included in the *ASTM Standard Safety Performance Specification for Fences/Barriers for Public, Commercial, and Multi-Family Residential Use Outdoor Play Areas, F2049*. A fence must surround a playground completely enclosing the play space, and measure at least 48 in. high. The latches of access gates should measure at least 48 in. high. To prevent children from passing through the fence, the vertical members of the fence should be spaced 4 inches apart or less.

In addition to the fencing described above, a discrete barrier, such as structural bollards, trees, or posts, should be placed along any side of the playground which is within 30 ft of streets or parking lots, to prevent a vehicle from accidentally entering the space. The discrete barrier can be concrete, structural, trees, or posts.

Question: Are fences required even when there is a large natural area behind a program? See #6 1.2, 3.2, and 5.3.

Answer: Complete, locked fences are required around all playground areas under all conditions - even if a natural area or a large natural barrier is present. There are rather frequent reports of children wandering off. Locked fences are essential for safety and protection.

Question: When children need to walk a long distance to the playground, and there are no instances of behavior problems, can programs receive credit at 5.4?

Answer: No. The program is scored on how far the children have to walk, regardless of their behavior. For Item 6 at 5.4, if children need to walk a long way to the playground, this is not considered easily accessible.

Question: Where can find the minimum diameter of a tree to plant as a barrier? How many trees would be needed to act as a barrier?

Answer: The general guidelines are included in the *ASTM Standard Safety Performance Specification for Fences/Barriers for Public, Commercial, and Multi-Family Residential Use Outdoor Play Areas, F2049*. Trees are categorized as a discrete barrier.

More specific information is not available about types of trees; however, shrubs or small trees that would be unable to stop a vehicle would not be allowable. In terms of planting trees, there would need to be a sufficient number and size/diameter to stop a vehicle under all conditions from ramming the fence. The trees should be of sufficient size and placement at the time of initial planting to serve this function.

REFERENCES

- ASTM International. (2017). *ASTM standard safety performance specification for fences/barriers for public, commercial, and multi-family residential use outdoor play areas, F2049*. Retrieved from <https://www.astm.org/Standards/F2049.htm>
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