

Interest Centers ECERS-3

All program staff should revisit the definition of an interest center. See page 11, *Explanation of Terms Used Throughout the Scale*, in the ECERS-3 spiral book. Many programs think that an “interest center” is a specific place in the classroom, but there are other clearly defined requirements:

1. “An interest center is a clearly defined play area for a particular kind of play.” This means that the area is used for a particular type of play. The “defined” means it is defined for dramatic play or defined for art. When dramatic play materials are being used in the block area, for instance, then it is not a defined block interest center. If science materials are used in the fine motor area, it is not a defined fine motor interest center. Setting up an area is only half of the planning. Teachers must see how children use the space and materials and adjust space, materials, and supervision accordingly.
2. “Materials must be organized by type and stored so they are accessible to the children.” When dramatic play materials are stored in the art area or the block area, then these areas cannot be considered interest centers. See each item for what can be stored in the specific interest center.
3. “Furniture must be provided for the use of the materials if needed.” The areas requiring a table and chairs are listed below:
 - Art
 - Dramatic play area
 - Nature/science area
4. “An appropriate amount of space must be provided for the type of play being encouraged by the materials and the number of children allowed to play in the center.” This means that teachers must *watch the way materials are used*, ensure there is no crowding, and ensure that active play does not take place in quiet play areas.

REQUIRED INTEREST CENTERS

- Cozy Area: 3, 5.2
- Books: 15, 5.3
- Blocks: 20, 5.3
- Dramatic Play: 21, 5.2
- Science: 22, 5.1
- A program may have other centers (i.e., math, music, etc.).

COZY AREA INTEREST CENTER

Item 3: Room arrangement for play and learning

- 5.2 At least 5 interest centers are used, including a cozy area protected from active play. The cozy area must be used at least 25 minutes during play. We often see active play taking place in the cozy area. So even though a cozy area is physically present, it may not meet the definition of an interest center, because children are engaging in dramatic play or other active play in that space.
- 7.1 Quiet and noisy play areas are all separated from one another, not just by furniture but by physical space. We often see areas separated by space, but teachers do not supervise the areas, and thus, active play takes place in quiet areas. Noisy play areas include dramatic play, blocks, music instruments or music played without headphones, and active physical play.
- 7.3 Centers requiring more space (blocks, dramatic play, very popular or active play) have sufficient space to accommodate the type of play required and the number of children who want to participate.

BOOK INTEREST CENTER

Item 15 Encouraging children's use of books

- 5.1, 7.1, 7.2 A wide selection of books accessible for one hour. At least five books must be about the topic that is related to current activities or themes.
- What is a wide selection? Books about people, feelings, nature or science, math, cultures, varying races, males and females, jobs, work, health, self-help, sports, hobbies, and abilities.
- Books also must reflect current classroom activities.
- 5.3, 7.3 Organized in a **defined interest center** and displayed to encourage use.

BLOCK INTEREST CENTER

Item 20 Blocks

- 5.1 Enough space, unit blocks, and accessories from 3 **categories** for 3 children to build sizeable independent structures at the same time
 - Small people
 - Vehicles
 - Animals
 - Other accessories used to enhance block play (road signs, fences, trees, small buildings, etc.)

- 5.2 Almost all blocks and accessories are stored on open, labeled shelves.
- 5.3 Special block interest center set aside, with storage and suitable building surface.
- 5.4 To receive credit for this indicator, a block interest center must meet the criteria included in 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3 and be accessible for play for at least **one hour** during the observation.
- 7.1, 5.4 Large hollow blocks in suitably large area for active play with open, labeled shelves.
- Large hollow blocks must be accessible for use in a suitably large area where the play can be very active for at least **25 minutes** during the observation. Hollow blocks allow children to create larger structures, and these can be made of wood, cardboard, or plastic.

DRAMATIC PLAY INTEREST CENTER

Item 21: Dramatic play

- 5.1, 5.2 A dramatic play **interest center** with many and varied dramatic play materials accessible for at least 1 hour.
- 7.1 At least 4 clear examples to represent diversity are accessible.

This indicator requires that, within the accessible dramatic play materials, examples of diversity are comprised of two different items that can be contrasted with one another, such as two pieces of play foods, each representing a different culture.

NATURE/SCIENCE INTEREST CENTER

Item 22: Nature/science

- 5.1 At least 15 nature/science materials, some from each of the 5 listed **categories** accessible in a defined **interest center** for at least 1 hour.
 - Living things
 - Natural objects
 - Factual books/nature-science picture games
 - Tools
 - Sand or water with toys
- 5.1 Nature/science includes sand or water activities with toys.
- 7.1 Staff initiate activities for measuring, comparing, or sorting using nature materials. (Sort by color, shape, size, arrange from biggest to smallest, create chart of rainfall, predict weights of natural objects.)

- 7.2 One or more pets/plants present that children can observe, care for, and are talked about with children.

For nature/science, a table and chairs allow children to work with natural objects and tools where other children cannot walk on or disturb concentration, draw in a science journal, weigh objects, use tools, engage with messy materials, and work with a teacher or peers to investigate.

FREQUENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: Doesn't an interest center need four sides? Can't we use tape on the floor to show where the interest centers are?

Answer: An interest center is not simply a space in the classroom. It is a defined area for a specific type of play. Children will not pay attention to or notice the tape on the floor – and the taped area may not represent the actual space that children use to play. In addition, the definition of an interest center clearly requires more than simply defining a space.

Question: My director and specialist worked with the teachers to set up interest centers. Why wouldn't we receive the highest level of credit for these centers?

Answer: There are many reasons a classroom may not receive credit for an interest center. Please revisit the definition of an interest center. Below are **frequent** reasons classrooms do not receive credit:

- The children carry materials out of one center and use them in another area. For example, dramatic play materials are taken over to the block area and played with in the middle of the block area. This limits the block area from being used by the children for the purpose of building complex block structures. **What should happen?** Teachers must always monitor and take steps to monitor play. For example, the teacher can say, "It's great that you want to dress up. Let's take the dress up clothing back to the dramatic play center." Or - "Oh, you want to play with puppets? Let's take the puppet play over here [to a table] so that it doesn't interrupt block play." Generally, when children are taking play materials out of a designated area, this is a clear sign that there is not ample space in the designated area for the number of children that want to play there and for the type of play.
- Materials are stored in center areas where they do not belong. For example, fine motor materials or unrelated art materials are stored in the science/nature center. **What should happen?** Teachers should evaluate where materials are stored and remove mixed and unrelated materials.

- Active play interrupts quiet play. We often see children playing with manipulatives in the library or book area or engaging in active play in the cozy area. Children can't read or relax, because they are interrupted by the active play. **What should happen?** Teachers should monitor quiet centers to be sure they are protected from active play and other interruptions.
- Materials are stored correctly in an area, but children cannot reach them (access them) because furniture or other equipment blocks access. When an area is too small for the number of children, even the presence of children may block access. For example, when fine motor materials are stored in a shelf behind the table with chairs, children sitting in the chairs may block access to the fine motor shelf. **What should happen?** Teachers must observe the way a center is actually used by the children to ensure that materials remain accessible.
- Materials are stored in a way that children are unaware of them, or do not notice them. When materials are "hidden away" and children do not use them, this indicates children do not have access. For example, when clothing or music instruments are located in a drawer unit, children may not easily reach them. **What should happen?** The materials should be provided in open baskets and shelves. If stored in drawer units, the assessors will observe whether children can actually use the materials independently or whether the drawer unit represents a barrier to use. It may be that the drawers stick or that the unit tips. Teachers should observe how children actually use the drawer unit and determine whether children can and do use the materials independently.
- Free play is not available for the required one hour. Most of the time, when children do not have one hour of free play, there are specific reasons. For example, free play is taken up with transitions and whole-group activities. There may be multiple clean-up times and multiple whole-group activities. **What should happen?** Teachers should track the actual number of minutes of free play daily.
- Often there are too many children using a specific play area. Teachers should have a system in place limit the number of children in a particular area.

Question: How do assessors determine how long classrooms have free play available?

Answer: Assessors always track the time **minute-by-minute** from the time they enter the classroom until the time they leave. They record the start and end time for every activity observed in the classroom. If teachers want to ensure one hour of free play, they should regularly track the actual time when free play is provided. They may be surprised to find that their posted schedule varies **substantially** from the actual schedule.