

ITERS-R: Tips & Clarifications

ITEM 1 – INDOOR SPACE

Question: I often see that programs need clarification about ample space in *Indicator 5.1*. Can you explain the meaning of “ample indoor space”? What are some examples?

Answer: The manual gives some examples of ample indoor space, such as “children and adults can move around freely; furnishings do not crowd room; space for equipment needed by children with disabilities; spacious open area for children to play” (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006, p. 10). The authors have used the illustration of being in an airport restroom. Many spaces in airport restrooms are tight and difficult to maneuver with your luggage; however, ample space in the restroom would allow you to easily maneuver with luggage and still have extra space. The expectation for ample space in the classroom is much the same. Consideration is also given to the number of children enrolled in each classroom.

It’s important to consider all spaces in the classroom to be sure these can be used easily by teachers and children. For example, when toddlers are playing with shape sorting toys and interlocking blocks in a play area, do they have ample space to reach materials and to play with them without disrupting the play of other children Does the space allow for freedom of movement, so that children don’t have to struggle to reach materials? When children are playing with music instruments, do they have room to move, dance, or march without colliding into other children? When ample space is present, children are less likely to experience frustration and more likely to engage successfully in play.

Question: For indicator 5.2., is it necessary for natural light to be present in each classroom? For example, we have a large window in one classroom and the light can be seen from two doorways into a second classroom that does not have its own windows.

Answer: Natural light must be present directly in each classroom from a window or skylight. Artificial lighting is important but is not considered natural lighting. Each program must work with available physical spaces; however, ITERS-R requires direct lighting for spaces where young children are present.

ITEM 2 – FURNISHINGS FOR ROUTINE CARE AND PLAY

Question: What are considerations for seating infants and toddlers at mealtime? A center is getting new furniture in the infant/toddler classroom. They want to get a group feeding table because it’s more convenient to have the chairs attached to the table. I’ve heard those tables aren’t good for children. What factors should we consider?

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Answer: According to All About the ITERS-R book, “Feeding time is a prime opportunity for staff to interact individually with very young children, timing their feeding and verbal interaction in response to each child’s needs and interests” (p. 20). Using individual, movable high chairs, allows teachers to personalize feeding times for infants.

Group feeding tables can seat four to eight infants; however, this arrangement does not allow for the individual care of children. When a teacher sits in front of six infants, her attention is divided, and she does not have the ability to tend to each child’s needs and interests.

A feeding chair also needs to be comfortable and supportive of children’s heads and feet. Group feeding tables do not provide adequate head support, when the back rest is too short. Most group feeding tables do not have a foot rest for children’s feet to rest comfortably. The plastic seats are often curved and slippery. Seating for young children should be appropriately sized. High chairs should provide a foot rest so children’s feet are comfortable instead of dangling.

For older toddlers who are able to sit at a child-sized table and chairs. For item 2 at 5.2, these chairs should allow children to sit back in the chair with feet touching the floor. Children should not need to perch on the edge for feet to touch. A child-sized table allows children’s knees to fit under the table while elbows are comfortably above the table. The notes on page 13 note that children should be able to sit independently, without being “put into” the chair by an adult.

Question: What is the best kind of storage for children’s individual possessions? What types of cubbies should we have?

Answer: Cubbies for infants/toddlers must be individualized and large enough to store all children’s possessions, including extra clothing during winter months. For clothing to dry and for health and safety, children’s clothing should not touch those of other children. Ensuring independent storage prevents the spread of lice and scabies. Even when cubbies are present for individual children and may be deep enough to store all of children’s possessions, programs should evaluate the placement of the hook. Sometimes the hook causes clothing to touch that of other children. These requirements relate to Item 2, at indicator 5.1.

Question: What kind of tables and chairs should be in the dramatic play area or other centers?

Answer: All classrooms should provide at least one table with two chairs where these can be used by toddlers. Of course, it is ideal to have multiple tables and chairs for children. Great places for tables and chairs are where children engage in art projects, dramatic play, use table toys, or eat. Child-sized means that toddlers are able to touch the floor with their feet while in the chair and the table is at an appropriate height for children to rest their elbows. Indicator 5.2 states that some child-sized table(s) and chairs should be used with toddlers.

Question: ITERS-R uses the term “furniture that promotes self-help.” What does this mean?

Answer: When children become more independent in their play, routines, and learning, furniture needs to be present that promotes independence. For example, furniture for toddlers that promotes self-help include steps up to a sink, child-sized toilets and sinks, small toy bins, low shelves, and child-sized tables and chairs for toddlers. Furniture for infants that promotes self-help include round or specially designed pillows to help infants sit up, supportive high chairs for feeding, and low shelves or baskets for toys. For both ages, these items promote independence.

For the ITERS-R, classrooms must provide a minimum of two examples of furniture that promote self-help. One of these must support routines, and one must support play. Indicator 5.3 provides some examples, including special chairs or other items to support children with physical disabilities and low, open shelves so that children can access toys and materials independently.

ITEM 3 – PROVISIONS FOR RELAXATION AND COMFORT

Question: What does “softness” mean when programs are planning toys for children’s play?

Answer: Soft, comfortable, and cozy spaces and materials are important for children’s development. Soft toys are especially important, as children are developing coordination and can easily grasp and comfortably play with toys that are flexible and safe. For the ITERS-R, there are several indicators that address soft toys and spaces. Soft toys are explained in indicator 3.2 and 5.3.

Note: When planning and selecting soft animals, remember that for ITERS-R, items must be accessible to children. Only soft toys that children can reach and can play with independently are considered accessible to children.

Examples of soft toys include the following items:

- Dolls with soft bodies or soft faces and bodies.
- Soft vinyl toys such as blocks, animals, or shaking toys.
- Puppets that are completely soft and made of a plush material.
- Toys that are covered in cloth and stuffed, such as cars, boats, and pretend food.
- Squishy plastic animals.
- Larger cloth or plush animals that children sit or lie on to relax or play.

ITERS-R provides for some exceptions to soft toys.

- Soft animals and dolls are not considered if they have beaded eyes, which are a choking hazard.
- Puppets with hard or plastic body parts and flat puppets made with thin cloth are not soft toys.

- Stuffed animals with hard, beaded eyes are a hazard and are not considered soft animals. Many programs have a basket of what look like soft animals, but only those without hard, beaded eyes are appropriate. Classrooms should inspect carefully and dispose of items with beaded eyes.
- Traditional, hard plastic dolls without soft bodies are not considered soft toys, even when these are dressed in soft pajamas.
- Vinyl and cloth books are not considered soft toys; however, these will be considered for item 14, which addresses books.

Question: We know we need a cozy area, but how can we protect this from active play?

Answer: Protected cozy areas are critical for young children who need protection from noise, activity, and interference from other children when spending time in group settings. Children should be able to play in the cozy area without disruption. Here are some tips for ensuring a protected cozy area:

- Place the cozy area in a different part of the room from active play centers such as blocks and dramatic play. For example, a cozy area may be placed on the opposite side of the room from the blocks and dramatic play centers.
- Keep the cozy area out of traffic areas and pathways so that other children and teachers cannot walk through it or disrupt the area.
- Protect the cozy area with a separate location or physical barrier, such as a cube or shelf.
- Show children how to use the cozy area by reading a book quietly, resting, or cuddling with a soft blanket.
- Provide careful supervision and support for the cozy area. For example, the teacher should redirect other children from the area and encourage appropriate quiet activities in the cozy area.
- *ITERS-R* at indicator 5.2 specifies that when other children run through the cozy area while a child is relaxing, teachers must be observed stopping and redirecting the active play (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2004).

ITEM 5 – DISPLAY FOR CHILDREN

Question: What kinds of displays are appropriate for infants and toddlers? May we hang objects from the ceiling or other furniture?

Answer: The *All About the ITERS-R* describes hanging displays for indicator 5.2 as three-dimensional objects hanging in space. Colorful, hanging objects that are three-dimensional should be easily seen by the children and make the children’s environment interesting, varied, and instructive. At least two examples should be in each room, although many more are encouraged. Below are appropriate examples:

- Mobiles (hanging objects with moving parts) or other three-dimensional objects (that have height, width, and depth) and are visible to all children.
- Hanging plants, beach balls, mobiles, colorful chains or tissue balls, and other light-weight textured objects.
- A mobile hanging over a diaper changing table where all children may view it during routines and play.

Restrictions include the following:

- Flat pieces of paper hanging from the ceiling, such as snowflakes or hearts, as these are considered two-dimensional and do not have depth.
- Three-dimensional objects hanging against a wall, such as a quilt, because these do not “hang in space.”
- Mobiles that are hung over a crib, since visibility is limited by time and number of children.

ITEM 13 – HELPING CHILDREN USE LANGUAGE

Question: We are trying to enrich our conversations and interactions with children, as these are so important to brain development. What are some examples of staff adding words to the actions they take as they respond to children throughout the day?

Answer: Teachers’ interactions with infants and children build their language and social skills. Infants listen to adults’ tone of voice and learn the meaning of words as they follow their gaze and pair language with its meaning.

ITERS-R encourages teachers to use interactions as teaching times. For indicator 5.2, the *All About Book* explains this in more detail. “Adding words to actions means that staff use a verbal commentary that describes the actions they are taking as they care for the children” (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2004, p. 174). This should be a priority throughout the day. Examples include:

- Naming foods children eat and describing how these taste or talking about the texture.
- Describing the steps of a diaper change as they are completed.
- Talking gently with a child waking up or going to sleep.
- Talking with children during play about specific toys and actions.
- Reading a story and relating the details to something in a child’s life or experience.
- Pointing out items displayed on a wall or shelf.
- Describing the child’s actions while playing.
- Asking questions and pointing out a child’s artwork.
- Drawing attention to what the child and you see outside of a window.

Indicator 5.2 requires that words be added throughout the day, including during gross motor time, free play, and routines. Teachers can narrate what they or children are doing. They can also add on information to what children say. Adding on and asking questions creates meaningful conversation between a child and teacher. Below are some examples:

Narrating while diaper changing: “It’s time to change your diaper. I am going to pick you up and put you on the diaper table. Let’s take off your wet diaper and wipe you clean. Doesn’t that feel better? I love your smile! It feels good to be dry and clean. Here’s a clean diaper. Where’s Elmo? Can you point to Elmo? There’s Elmo! Your momma says you love to hug Elmo when you go to sleep. Let’s snap your pants and get you ready to play.”

Narrating during outdoor garden play: “Julian, you are busy digging. What have you found? Oh you found a worm! Can you see him wiggle? He’s really active. Does it tickle?”

Adding on to what children say. Julian says, “Oh, I got a stone. It was buried under the leaf.” The teacher responds, “Your stone is shiny and grey. What do you think your worm does when she bumps into the stone?” Julian responds, “My worm wiggles around the stone so he won’t bump into it.”

Adding on to what children say. Marian says, “I got a dump truck.” The teacher responds, “You have a green dump truck. What did you load inside the bed? The truck bed is the square part where you can put things.” Marian says, “I put blocks in it.” The teacher responds, “Yes, you loaded blocks into the bed. Where will you drive your truck?”

Question: What can a teacher do to be more skillful at interpreting and responding to infants and toddlers and understanding what they need?

Answer: Infant and toddler communication includes crying, gestures, vocalizations, and trying out words before the words become recognizable to others (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2004). According to *All About the ITERS-R*, being “skillful at interpreting” means that staff usually understand what children mean, with few exceptions. “Follow through appropriately” means that staff acknowledge children’s attempts at communications and respond with appropriate words or actions to follow up in a timely manner to meet children’s needs.

For Indicator 5.3, teachers need to successfully understand children and follow up appropriately at least 75% of the time to respond. Below are examples:

- Making reassuring sounds when calming a baby.
- Picking up and rocking a baby when she lifts her arms.
- Repeating a toddler’s words and using actions to show understanding.
- Adding words to what children say. “Juice.” “Oh, Sarah, would you like some juice? I will put juice in the cup for you to drink.”

- Making eye contact and nodding to acknowledge a child is heard.
- Using a pleasant facial expression, nodding, and smiling.
- Picking up a child in a relaxed way.
- Taking action to satisfy a child's needs (responding quickly) without making the child wait to have his or her needs met.

ITEM 14 – USING BOOKS

Question: How can I be sure that the books we use are appropriate for toddlers? We heard that *The Three Little Pigs* may have images or content that is not appropriate. Can you give a definition of what makes a book inappropriate?

Answer: Books for infants and toddlers should be simple and clear, with the content of the book at the appropriate level for the children. Appropriate books contain images and content that teach, that are appealing, and are interesting to very young children. A variety of books that are interesting and appealing and that strengthen learning and development are available.

It is important to protect children from images and content that depict violent or frightening pictures or story content. If an animal is portrayed as “scary” with sharp teeth and a menacing look, this may be scary for some children, and is not appropriate. When sword fights are present in the book, *Peter Pan*, this is an example of violence. Another version of *Peter Pan* may not include weapons or fight scenes in the illustrations or text. Many fairy tales and Disney books contain illustrations that may be frightening or show weapons. Other books depict fighting in humorous ways, which is not appropriate for young children.

ITEM 17 – ART

Question: What are appropriate options for art materials? Can teachers use glitter, pom-poms, and other small textiles with toddlers and infants?

Answer: When art materials are used with infants and toddlers, proper supervision and use must be considered (Cryer, Harms, & Riley). Appropriate art materials for older toddlers include full-size crayons, water color markers, brush and finger paints, play dough, and materials with different textures. Appropriate materials for younger toddlers include easy-to-use, child-safe materials, water color paints, and crayons. An adult should be within arm's reach of all toddlers during use of art materials and supervise carefully.

Dangerous art items and those that can cause choking should never be used. Glitter should never be used with infants or toddlers. When glitter gets in the eye, it can cause serious eye injury. Pom poms,

cotton balls, marker caps, thin or broken crayons, beans, and Styrofoam peanuts are choking hazards and should never be used with infants or toddlers. Edible materials such as pudding, dried pasta, corn, beans, and popcorn are never appropriate as art materials because they give a misleading message about the correct use of food (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006).

Question: Teachers and families often expect craft-type art projects where all the children's projects look the same. How can we promote individualized art that invites children to explore their creativity through open-ended art materials? Can we still make some craft items for special events such as Mother's Day?

Answer: Craft activities are acceptable as long as they are not the usual expectations and are saved for special occasions. On a typical day, artwork should encourage individual expression. "Individual expression means that children are allowed to use art materials in their own creative way. They are free to express their own ideas, using the skills that they currently possess" (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2004, p. 233). Staff may choose the topic or theme of the art, such as flowers, and allow children to choose which materials they use to make flowers. For example, children may choose paint or markers and create the flower in their own way. Staff may choose materials for a project, such as water color paints; however, children should be able to express themselves individually by painting whatever they like in colors they choose. "Individual expression means that children can select the subject and/or the medium to use in an art activity" (p. 233).

Appropriate art experiences allow children to experiment with their own ideas and materials and to express their ideas and interests. When creating individualized art, children feel proud to do their own work rather than feeling frustrated by trying to recreate another's craft or example. Individual art expression offers the opportunity for teachers to track a child's development and see the progression of growth in expression, communication, and fine motor skills.

ITEM 21 – SAND AND WATER PLAY

Question: What are some tips to help teachers provide close supervision at sand and water tables?

Answer: A teacher needs to be within arm's reach of children at all times during sand and water play to prevent children from drinking, eating, or throwing sand and water. This is described in indicator 3.2. Sand and water play offers a variety of benefits including sensory stimulation, fine motor development, and social-emotional skills. For children to access these benefits, they must be in a safe environment with a teacher who is carefully supervising their play.

ITEM 22 – How can we help children have meaningful experiences at the science center, when they are so young?

Answer: ITERS-R item 22 requires that children visit or experience living animals or plants in an indoor area on a daily basis. For more information, review the notes on page 43. The following are examples of daily science experiences mentioned in indicator 5.2:

- Plants and animals located in a position that children can easily see and experience.
- A pet turtle in the classroom or another location that is visited every day.
- A school entrance with an aquarium with fish that toddlers visit every morning to feed. Children must experience feeding the fish daily.
- Living plants in the classroom at eye level for children to see, touch, and care for.
- A window low enough for children to see outside independently without being lifted up accompanied by conversation between the teacher and children about what they observe outside. Teachers must engage children in discussion about what is viewed outside the window to be considered a science experience.
- Hanging plants are okay only if teachers engage children in conversation about the plant or take it down for children to participate in watering and care.
- A window box or indoor window garden on the children’s eye-level that children can observe and help care for.
- A classroom pet, such as a Guinea pig, hamster, or fish. Children should participate in daily care for the pet.

ITEM 23 – USE OF TV, VIDEO, AND/OR COMPUTER

Question: What are guidelines related to the use of technology with infants and toddlers?

Answer: Television, video, and/or computers may not be used with children under 24 months of age. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that children under the age of two should not be allowed to view television or media due to persuasive research indicating negative effects on development. The ITERS-R book states that the age limit is 12 months. Please read the updated notes related to technology use on the Environment Rating Scales Institute Website. **The accurate age limit for technology use with the above stated restrictions is 24 months.**

For children two years and older, no more than 30 minutes total time may be viewed (including computer, laptop, or tablet) PER WEEK. Children two years and older are limited to 15 minutes per day for computer use. No media or screen time is ever allowed during meals or snacks.

When media is used with children ages two years and older, it must be educational in content, offer active involvement, and be age-appropriate for children’s viewing. Because infants and toddlers learn best through active exploration of the physical world, media use should be discouraged.

WEATHER PERMITTING

Question: When should we take children outside?

Answer: All children should have some outdoor time daily, weather permitting. In Illinois, the term “weather permitting” means temperatures between **25 and 90 degrees, taking into consideration the wind chill and active precipitation**. 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.

Outdoor play is considered in ITERS-R for item 16: 3.2 and 5.1, item 22: 5.1, item 29: 5.2, and item 30: 3.1.

References

Cryer, D., Harms, T., & Riley, C. (2004). *All about the ITERS-R*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Harms, T., Cryer, D. & Clifford, R. (2006). *Infant/toddler environment rating scale* (Revised Edition). New York: Teachers College Press.

