In this fourth of six tip sheets on the North Carolina Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS), we will look at the quality indicators for Learning Activities.

Learning activities are a key ingredient in any early childhood setting. Without them, children miss out on golden opportunities to develop skills and gain knowledge during their earliest years.

The ITERS evaluates the following Learning Activity areas in programs that work with infants through young two-year-olds:

- Eye-hand Coordination
- Active Physical Play
- Art
- Music and Movement
- Blocks
- Pretend Play
- Sand and Water Play
- Cultural Awareness

To assess these areas, the ITERS looks at the following criteria:

1. Are classroom materials and equipment in good repair and are they non-toxic?
2. Is there a variety of developmentally appropriate materials and equipment?
3. Are materials and equipment accessible to the children? Can the children reach materials and equipment without the help of an adult?
4. Are materials and equipment available a substantial part of the day (at least one third of the time the children are in attendance, i.e. 3 hours out of a 9 hour program)?
5. Is there adequate uncluttered space, inside and outside?
6. Are there music activities provided at least three times a week?
7. Do the children go outside at least three times a week, weather permitting?

What do programs that score higher on this subscale have in common? First, they have teachers who help children develop eye-hand coordination skills, talk to children about their activities, sing with children and participate with them in their play.

Another attribute of programs that have high scores in the Learning Activities subscale is that classroom materials are rotated to provide new challenges for the children. Moreover, the materials are well-organized.

Also, cultural awareness is evident through the use of multi-racial books and dolls for children. Pictures of males and females in similar work and play roles are displayed at children’s eye-level.

Learning Activities For Toddlers

What can you do to improve your children’s classroom experience? Here are some ideas that support the ITERS Learning Activities areas.

A Class Mural (Art Activity)

Cover a table with paper and provide large crayons. Children can scribble on the paper at different times during the morning, leaving their crayons at the table and returning to draw another time. This allows toddlers to return several times during the morning, since toddlers don’t focus very long on any one thing. The teacher can build language development by making comments such as, “I see that you are coloring with the big red crayon” or “Look, you have drawn a circle!”

Washing potatoes (Water Play Activity)

In the water table, provide six to twelve large potatoes and several vegetable brushes. Have the children wash the potatoes so that they can be cooked for lunch.
Jars and Lids
(Eye-Hand Coordination Activity)
Gather an assortment of unbreakable jars and lids. Toddlers will enjoy taking off the lids and putting them back on. This exercise will increase eye-hand coordination and matching skills. Objects that are large enough to prevent swallowing but small enough to fit into some of the jars can be added for extra interest. The teacher can facilitate learning by making comments such as, “You put the small lid on the small jar” or “What jar do you think this big lid will fit on?”

The ECERS Learning Activities subscale evaluates programs for 2 ½ year olds to five year olds. The subscale’s Learning Activity areas are:
• Fine Motor
• Art
• Music & Movement
• Blocks
• Sand & Water Play
• Dramatic Play
• Nature & Science
• Math/numbers
• Use of TV, video and/or computers
• Accepting Diversity

Note that the ECERS uses the same criteria that are listed on Page 4 for the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale.

Like the ITERS, there are plenty of ways to achieve high ECERS scores in the Learning Activity area. Here are just a few . . .

• If computers are available, use them as one of many free choice activities.
• Provide activities that promote understanding and acceptance of diversity.

Learning Activities For Two’s to Five’s

The Blowing Game (Science Activity)

With two and three year olds
Place a variety of small objects on a large piece of construction paper. Ask the children to blow the objects off the construction paper. Children will have great fun blowing a variety of objects off the paper (i.e. paper cup, crayon, spool, toilet paper roll, a block, small car, etc.). The teacher observes the children’s efforts and asks thought provoking questions such as, “Why do you think that you weren’t able to blow the block off the paper?

With four and five year olds
Place objects of various weights on a large sheet of construction paper. Ask the children to guess what objects they think they can blow off the paper. The teacher can extend the learning by asking questions such as, “Why do you think you can not blow off the block?” After the children have made their predictions, then they can test their predictions by trying to blow off the objects.

Color Drop & Mix (Fine Motor Activity)
Place an ice tray on a cafeteria tray. In three of the ice tray compartments, place red, blue and yellow food color (a different color in each compartment). In the other compartments, place clear water. Provide several eye droppers so that children can mix the food color and see what colors they can make. Also, provide coffee filters onto which children to drop the mixed color. Protective aprons are recommended. This activity can also be an art project.

Grocery store (Dramatic Play Activity)
Change your housekeeping area into a grocery store. Provide empty cans (with the rough edges smoothed off), empty food boxes, pretend fruits and vegetables, paper bags, small carts, dolls, cash register, play money, paper and markers to make signs, scale, aprons, etc. Be sure to provide ethnic food boxes and cans.

Summing It Up
Achieving a high score on the ITERS and ECERS Learning Activity subscale may seem like a dream (and a lot of work), but there really are plenty of ways to do it. Follow some of these above suggestions and see how quickly and easily your children are engaged in stimulating, hands-on learning activities. And watch your scores go up!