

Two New School-Age Child Care Resources Available

by Kay Albrecht

Two new school-age child care resources are now available to assist providers. Both resources were developed and published by well-recognized experts in the school-age child care field and add substantially to the tools available to the neglected member of the child care family, who gets less attention than programs for younger children.

The School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale by Thelma Harms, Ellen Vineberg Jacobs, and Donna Romano White represents the conclusion of a series of program evaluation tools developed by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development team. This scale joins previous ones designed for infant and toddler, preschool, and family day care settings to offer valuable tools for all early childhood programs, as well as researchers delving into quality issues.

The scales are observation-based and focus the observer's attention on 36 important dimensions of quality like indoor space, space for gross

motor activities, space for privacy, room arrangement, furnishing for routine care, learning and recreational activities, relaxation and comfort, and so on. The SACERS was designed to be used for classroom self-evaluation by staff, in staff training, by staff who supervise and monitor programs, by researchers measuring global quality, and as a blueprint for developing new programs which meet quality guidelines.

School-age child care programs in the field will welcome a resource which has so many possible uses. It could be used, for example, to determine program strengths and

weaknesses, to identify areas of the physical environment that need attention and improvement, to help staff evaluate their own classrooms and compare them with indicators of quality, to calibrate the expectation of staff with those of management or boards of directors (or the reverse!), or to design and implement a staff training program that covers the important dimensions of quality.

The rating scale is very user-friendly, particularly to users of the other rating scales, and is understandable to school-age child care providers who have a basic knowledge about developmentally appropriate school-age child care programs.



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It cannot, however, substitute for a deep understanding of child growth and development and school-age child care programming knowledge. The SACERS does not indicate which of the 36 dimensions are the ones to work on first or which ones are the most important compared to the others. Neither does it provide information about changing a rating from low to high or identifying an improvement strategy. As such, it will be of the most use to experienced, knowledgeable school-age child care providers.

The second resource represents an exciting development within the school-age child care field. *The Pilot Standards for School-Age Quality*, published by the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) and developed in conjunction with the School-Age Child Care Project at the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, are being used to field test a program improvement and accreditation system for school-age child care.

The standards are divided into 36 key dimensions of quality organized in six categories. Each key dimension has several standards and each standard has examples which illustrate what to look for when assessing the standard. Programs are to rate their compliance with each standard on a four point scale from 0 (somewhat met) to 3 (fully met).

Although the actual implementation of the accreditation system is still in the future (NSACA plans a phased in implementation of the system sometime in 1998), the pilot standards provide school-age child care

programs with another powerful tool for program evaluation, improvement, and advocacy.

Programs might use the standards, for example, to get a baseline of where they are in comparison to these national guidelines, to determine if their staff qualifications are comparable to the national standards, to have discussions with program staff about specific standards of quality, or to advocate for additional supplies, equipment, facilities, or resources using the national standards as support.

The standards serve a particularly positive potential for programs that have toiled to define, develop, and demonstrate high quality school-age child care. If programs find they are in substantial compliance with the standards, they are poised to reap the recognition of accreditation by NSACA when the accreditation component of the system is available.

The Pilot Standards also offer another important opportunity. Because they are pilot standards, NSACA is looking for and requesting feedback about the usefulness of the standards, comments about the importance of the selected key dimensions, and other examples and illustrations that might make the standards clearer, etc. Therefore, school-age providers who use the pilot standards to assess program quality now and provide feedback to the NSACA will actually be contributing to the further refinement of the standards.

The Pilot Standards do not stand alone, however. They are designed

to be used as a part of a process of program evaluation and improvement that is ongoing and recurring. Susan O'Connor's *Assessing School-Age Child Care Quality* serves as a guide to this process. The ASQ process is comprehensive and assumes a high level of program sophistication. Therefore, *The Pilot Standards* may be the most useful to programs that want to focus on program improvement rather than just program evaluation and have staff skilled enough to support such an effort.

Both documents stand to supplement our advocacy efforts to secure high quality school-age child care for all school-age children. Both say loudly and clearly that the leftover space and staff from other types of programs are not enough. Both can help school-age child care providers make a case for change within their own programs and systems. And both documents can be obtained through *School-Age NOTES* by calling (615) 242-8464.

Most importantly, these resources join previous work completed by the Wellesley School-Age Child Care Project and Project Home Safe's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Quality Criteria* to expand considerably the arsenal of program evaluation, improvement, and advocacy resources available to the providers of school-age child care. In doing so, both contribute to helping to refine and perfect our definition of best practice in school-age child care and, as such, are a most welcome addition.