

ECERS-3: Lowest Scoring Items and Indicators



This document provides a summary of the lowest scoring items and indicators from ECERS-3 assessments conducted between May 1, 2022, and June 1, 2025. The data reflects both DCDEE and Outreach Assessments completed across North Carolina. In total, 197 assessments with an overall average score of 4.47 were conducted in 161 child care facilities during this period.

This document does not replace the ECERS-3 or the NC Additional Notes, which are essential for accurate scoring and interpretation. Rather, it draws attention to frequently noted areas of concern and is not intended to provide a complete explanation of all scoring considerations, scenarios, or requirements.

The items in this summary are separated by subscale and focus only on those with average scores below 5.0. The average scores are shown in parenthesis after each item's name along with a list of indicators often not earning credit. While the emphasis is on lower scoring areas, we encourage programs to thoughtfully review all subscales, items, and indicators within the ECERS-3 to support comprehensive quality improvement.



Learning Activities

Item 25. Understanding written number (2.64)

- **Indicator 3.3:** Staff do not interact with children as they play with math materials that show numbers.
- **Indicator 3.4:** An example of staff showing or talking with children about how numbers relate to the corresponding number of objects does not occur.
- **Indicator 5.1:** There are not at least 3 play materials to help children learn the meaning of print/written numbers (e.g., a puzzle of numbers 1-10 with the matching number of pictures under each piece).
- **Indicator 5.2:** Children cannot use materials that show the meaning of print/written numbers for at least 1 hour during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.3:** Staff do not help children learn to use the materials that show written numbers and corresponding quantities.

Item 22. Nature/Science (2.69)

- **Indicator 3.3:** Sand or water play with toys is not provided for children's use for at least 25 minutes during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.1:** There are less than 15 nature/science materials in an organized interest center, materials from all 5 categories are not present, nature/science materials are in various areas around the room vs. gathered in an interest center, or there are many other types of materials stored in the nature/science area. Children cannot use nature/science materials for 1 hour during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.2:** An example of staff using and talking about science materials with children does not occur.
- **Indicator 5.3:** No examples of staff showing concern for the environment occur (e.g., discuss taking care of plants by not over or under watering them, talk about recycling or composting, or using less water or turning lights off when a room is empty and then explaining why they do this).

Item 20. Blocks (2.71)

- **Indicator 1.2:** Children's block play is not supported (e.g., staff do not acknowledge or talk to children about their block play or encourage them to become involved in block play).
- **Indicator 3.4:** When children use blocks, staff do not interact with them.
- **Indicator 5.1:** There is not enough space or blocks to build three sizeable, age-appropriate structures.

- **Indicator 5.2:** The blocks and accessories are not stored on open, labeled shelves (e.g., unit blocks have matching shapes on the shelf; there is a picture of animals on the shelf where the animal accessory basket goes).
- **Indicator 5.3:** Materials other than blocks and accessories are stored/used in the block area such as music instruments, gross motor toys, large interlocking blocks, or dramatic play props (beyond basic block accessories). The block area is not out of traffic.
- **Indicator 5.4:** The schedule experienced by children does not allow for use of a special block area for at least 1 hour during the observation or requirements were not met for indicators 5.1, 5.2, or 5.3.
- **Indicator 5.5:** Interactions with children related to block play tend to be brief, rather than having conversations that involve back-and-forth exchanges. While there may be one example of a conversation related to block play, a second example is not observed.

Item 23. Math materials and activities (2.73)

- **Indicator 3.1:** There are not at least two materials from each category (counting/comparing quantities; measure/comparing sizes/fractions; familiarity with shapes). Materials are not accessible to children for 25 minutes during the observation.
- **Indicator 3.2:** Staff do not talk to children or share information with them as they play with math materials.
- **Indicator 5.1:** There are not at least 10 math materials with at least three examples from each category (counting/comparing quantities; measure/comparing sizes/fractions; familiarity with shapes). Materials are not accessible to children for 1 hour during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.2:** Fewer than three examples of staff interacting with children as they play with math materials occur.
- **Indicator 5.3:** Children are not encouraged to use their fingers to represent numbers.

Item 24. Math in daily events (2.97)

- **Indicator 3.2:** There is not an example of staff talking about math while children use non-math materials (e.g., counting how many plates are on the housekeeping table, comparing how tall different children's sculptures are).
- **Indicator 3.3:** Math talk is not used during large group events such as circle time or other activities, transitions, or routines.
- **Indicator 5.1:** Math learning is not promoted during personal care routines through staff interaction at least twice (e.g., breakfast, handwashing, etc.).
- **Indicator 5.2:** There are fewer than two examples of staff having conversations about math while children use materials in non-math areas (e.g., talking about how many toys float in the water table after a child said there were a lot).

Item 18. Art (3.81)

- **Indicator 5.1:** There is not at least one functional art material from each category (e.g., drawing, painting, 3D, collage, tools). Children are not able to use the required art materials independently for at least 1 hour during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.2:** There are more than two examples of observed or displayed art activities that do not promote individual expression (e.g., children follow an example or are assigned a topic, completed work all looks similar).
- **Indicator 5.3:** There are not at least two staff-child conversations related to the children's artwork.

Item 19. Music and movement (3.98)

- **Indicator 5.1:** Fewer than 10 music materials are present. Children cannot use music materials for at least 1 hour during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.2:** During free play times, there are no examples of staff doing a music activity, such as singing or dancing, with the children.
- **Indicator 5.3:** A movement or dance activity does not occur at any point during the observation.

Item 21. Dramatic Play (4.17)

- **Indicator 5.1:** There is not a wide variety of dramatic play materials for children to use. There are some dramatic play materials but dress up clothes for both boys and girls are not present.
- **Indicator 5.2:** Children cannot use many and varied dramatic play materials for at least 1 hour during the observation. The dramatic play materials are not organized in a defined interest center.
- **Indicator 5.3:** There are not two staff-child conversations about children's play in the dramatic play area.

Item 26. Promoting the acceptance of diversity (4.44)

- **Indicator 5.1:** There are not at least two different dramatic play materials representing racial or cultural diversity. Children cannot use play materials for at least 1 hour during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.2:** There are not at least ten examples of diversity or examples of diversity are not found in books, pictures, and play materials. Children cannot use materials for at least 1 hour during the observation.

Item 17. Fine Motor (4.69)

- **Indicator 5.2:** Children cannot use fine motor materials from each category (interlocking building materials, manipulatives, puzzles, art) for at least 1 hour during the observation.

**Language and Literacy****Item 16. Becoming familiar with print (3.79)**

- **Indicator 3.2:** There is not an example of staff pointing to print while reading the words or letters.
- **Indicator 5.2:** An example of staff helping children understand how or why print is useful does not occur. (e.g., having children write their name on a list if they want a turn in a popular area and explaining that the list lets the teacher know who is next).
- **Indicator 5.3:** Staff do not write down something a child said (e.g., adding children's captions to their artwork or writing answers to the question of the day on a flip chart), or examples of this are not displayed.

Item 12. Helping children expand vocabulary (4.11)

- **Indicator 5.1:** Specific and descriptive words about people, places, things, and actions are not often used by staff.
- **Indicator 5.2:** There are not two instances when staff explain the meaning of a new or unfamiliar word for children.
- **Indicator 5.3:** Words are not often introduced to children based on the materials, display, activities, or other experiences that occur during the observation.

Item 14. Staff use of books with children (4.26)

- **Indicator 5.1:** Fewer than two books are read with the children during the observation either formally such as during group time or informally during center play.
- **Indicator 5.3:** When books are used, all children are not actively engaged.
- **Indicator 5.4:** There are not two different examples of staff demonstrating much interest or enjoyment when reading books to children.

Item 15. Encouraging children's use of books (4.29)

- **Indicator 5.1:** There are not enough books based on the number of children in the group. Children cannot use books for at least 1 hour during the observation.
- **Indicator 5.2:** No children are observed using a book independently or as a free choice with staff encouragement.
- **Indicator 5.4:** When children use books independently staff do not show interest, or no children use a book independently.

Item 13. Encouraging children to use language (4.77)

- **Indicator 5.2:** Bi-directional staff-child conversations do not occur often during indoor free play times.
- **Indicator 5.4:** Children are not helped to communicate verbally with one another (e.g., "It seems like you are interested in her painting, can you ask her a question about it?" or "Tell her how that made you feel.").



Space and Furnishings

Item 5. Display (3.54)

- **Indicator 1.3:** There is not an example of staff talking to children about any of the display.
- **Indicator 3.3:** No examples of staff talking to children about the display occur.
- **Indicator 5.2:** Displayed items do not include any examples that relate to the current topics of interest (e.g., themes, seasons, a child's expressed interest).
- **Indicator 5.3:** There are not many examples of individualized child work displayed (e.g., approximately one-third of the display is work that is child selected and directed). There may be a lot of child work, but it is not individualized.
- **Indicator 5.4:** There are not at least two examples of staff talking about the display with children during free play and/or routines. The display, such as a calendar, is discussed only during group times.

Item 7. Gross motor equipment (4.21)

- **Indicator 3.3:** Gross motor equipment used during the observation does not stimulate at least seven different skills outdoors, or five skills on days when outdoor play does not occur.
- **Indicator 5.1:** There is not enough gross motor equipment to keep all of the children engaged. Either portable or stationary gross motor equipment is offered, but not both types when the weather permits outdoor play.
- **Indicator 5.3:** Children cannot use gross motor equipment for at least 30 minutes during the observation.

Item 6. Space for gross motor play (4.28)

- **Indicator 5.2:** Children cannot use a spacious gross motor area for at least 30 minutes. Outdoor play does not occur during the observation when the weather allows.
- **Indicator 5.3:** The mulch/sand/wood chips are not deep enough (inadequate cushioning), spacing of equipment is too close (inadequate fall zones), there is no fence or ASTM 1292 documentation is not provided for manufactured surfacing.
- **Indicator 5.4:** The route to gross motor space is lengthy or not convenient. For example, children walk through the building, use long hallways or stairways, or walk through another playground or classroom to get to the outdoor space.



Interaction

Item 31. Peer Interaction (4.81)

- **Indicator 5.2:** Staff do not support children's social skills development by helping them solve problems when there are disagreements or conflicts.

Item 32. Discipline (4.81)

- **Indicator 5.2:** Children are not told the reason or explanation for a rule or why a certain behavior is not allowed.



Personal Care Routines

Item 10. Health Practices (4.47)

- **Indicator 5.1:** Children do not wash hands when needed (e.g., arrivals, re-entry, after sand or other messy play, before/after using wet materials such as playdough or water play, messy play, after wiping noses, after contamination) and staff do not remind them.
- **Indicator 5.3:** Adult handwashing does not occur as needed (e.g., arrivals, re-entry, after sand or other messy play, before/after using wet materials such as playdough or water play, messy play, after wiping noses, after contamination).

Item 8. Meals/snacks (4.50)

- **Indicator 5.3:** Children or staff re-contaminate their hands after washing before meals by touching toys, walls, floors, a trash can lid, etc., or handwashing does not occur for children or staff before and after a meal or snack. Tables are not first cleaned, then sanitized, and left to air dry for at least 2 minutes.
- **Indicator 5.4:** Children who are 4 years old or older are not encouraged to help in age-appropriate ways during meals and/or snacks. Only a basic example of self-help such as throwing away their own plate occurs rather than other examples such as helping set the table, serve themselves, or opening their own milk cartons.



Harms, T., Clifford, R., & Cryer, D. (2015). *Early childhood environment rating scale. (Third edition)*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.