

DECE Item Guide to the Quick Environment Checklist (QEC)

New York City Department of Education, Division of Early Childhood Education

What is QEC?

The Quick Environment Check (QEC), adapted from the ECERS-3, measures environmental factors and certain practices within the classroom. Items observed with the Quick Environment Check include classroom space, availability of learning activities, availability and condition of furniture, as well as potential health and safety concerns in areas used by children. Practices reviewed using the Quick Environment Check include handwashing, cleaning before and after meals, and staffs' explicit social and emotional interactions with children.

Beginning in the school year 2021-2022, the Division of Early Childhood (DECE) will use the QEC to conduct assessments in early childhood programs.

What does the QEC tool measure?

The QEC is split into two modules, Program and Classroom Level.

QEC Modules	Program Level	Classroom Level
QEC Module Descriptions	Captures opportunities for play, specifically Gross Motor and Center Time.	Captures many components in a classroom, including hazards, classroom space, handwashing, meal/snack, social/emotional, and learning activities and materials.
QEC Items	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gross Motor• Learning Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hazards• Classroom Space• Handwashing• Meal/Snack• Social/Emotional• Learning Activities & Materials

What does the QEC tool measure?

PROGRAM LEVEL		
Items	Gross Motor	Learning Activities
Descriptions	Items within this practice identify if the schedule has allotted time for children to have vigorous outdoor and/or indoor gross motor play.	These items look at whether Center Time was observed and how staff and children use books.

CLASSROOM LEVEL						
Items	Hazards	Classroom Space	Handwashing	Meal/Snack	Social/Emotional	Learning Activities & Materials
Descriptions	Looks at whether there are hazards in the classroom and other areas used by children.	Captures the physical environment of the classroom, including furniture.	Assesses if adults and children make attempts to wash and/or sanitize their hands when needed.	Looks at whether proper sanitary procedures were attempted before and after a meal.	Assesses the relationship between staff and children and resources available for children to self-regulate.	Captures interactions and materials available and accessible to children during play.

How does the Early Childhood Framework (EFQ) align with QEC?

The DECE developed the Early Childhood Framework for Quality (EFQ), which describes our shared vision for high quality early childhood programming in New York City. Programs use the EFQ to guide their practice in a way that advances positive outcomes for all children and families. DECE staff use the EFQ as the foundation for the quality support provided to programs, including on-site support and professional learning. This resource ensures that all DOE early childhood programs, regardless of setting or location, are held accountable to the same standards and supported to meet the same expectations of quality.

The EFQ is comprised of six Elements:

1. Respect and value differences.
2. Create safe and positive environments.
3. Advance play-based learning and responsive instruction.
4. Promote families’ roles as primary caregivers, teachers, and advocates.
5. Work collaboratively towards continuous quality improvement.
6. Demonstrate strategic leadership.

Information about the alignment between EFQ and QEC is shown below:

QEC Modules	Program Level	Classroom Level
QEC Descriptions	Captures opportunities for play, specifically Gross Motor and Center Time.	Captures many components in a classroom, including hazards, classroom space, handwashing, meal/snack, social/emotional, and learning activities and materials.
Connection to NYC DECE Early Childhood Framework for Quality	<p>Create safe and positive environment Program leadership teams and teaching teams create healthy, nurturing, and predictable environments for all children, families and staff.</p> <p>Advance play-based learning and responsive instruction Program leadership teams and teaching teams engage children in a variety of play-based and developmentally appropriate learning experiences, and ensure that instruction is based on children’s individual strengths, interests, and needs.</p>	

How to use the QEC Item Guide

This guide is designed as a resource for programs to understand the items in the QEC. Overall requirements for each item are explained in general terms. Overall requirements for each item are explained in general terms. This guide includes 2 module pages and 8 item pages.

How the QEC Item pages are organized:

Item Name

Item: Learning Activities

What is it?

Scale items under Learning Activities focus on the use of books by children and staff, as well as opportunities for Center Time.

What does it measure?

Learning Activities measures whether staff read books to children and if books are easily accessible to children. In addition, this item measures whether children have Center Time/Choice Time during the observation.

Why is it important?

Early childhood staff play a critical role in encouraging children to develop a lifelong love of books. Children who regularly have books read to them progress from turning pages and studying pictures to eventually reading on their own.

As children actively and confidently explore and learn through play, they develop the background knowledge that is essential for making connections and deepening their understanding. Furthermore, they are empowered and encouraged to intentionally self-select from a variety of learning activities and resources accessible to them that represent the diversity of children in the classroom and in New York City.

Things to consider...

Staff read a book with children at least once.

- Staff reads a book to children during Morning Meeting or a read aloud.
- Staff may also use a book to answer a child's question during Center Time.

There is at least one opportunity for children to use books.

- For example, children are free to read books during transition time and/or Center Time.
- After breakfast, staff allows children to read a book while waiting for peers to finish eating.

Center Time must be observed.

- For example, during Arrival, after children put away their belongings, they have the choice to read books, play with table toys, or use art materials.

What it's about and its importance

Additional information about what is considered with examples.

QEC Resources

This Item Guide is intended to be a companion to the scale and not a comprehensive resource, as it provides an abridged version of the information presented in the *All About the ECERS-3* book.

1. [Table Cleaning Procedures](#)
2. [Hand Cleaning Procedures](#)
3. [EPA Approved Cleaning Products Resource](#)
4. [Safety Guidelines](#)
5. [Encouraging Children's Use of Appropriate Books in Early Childhood](#)

Program Level

Purpose:

The goal of the Program Level data is to capture opportunities for scheduled play time including time allotted for both Gross Motor and Center Time for children. **Data for items under this module is collected only once during a program visit.**

Items:

1. *Gross Motor*
2. *Learning Activities*

Explanation of Terms Used in Program

Level:

Gross Motor skills involving large muscle movements, such as independent sitting, crawling, walking, or running.

“Vigorous” gross motor activity refers to the type of play that gives children an opportunity to put forth physical effort and energy, develop their large muscle skills, and build physical strength. Gross motor play is considered "vigorous" when children have enough movement, such as running, using wheel toys, and/or actively dancing/exercising, for a sustained block of time of at least 15 minutes in order for their heart rate to increase.

Reading books means that staff read the print content of books.

Staff refers to adults who work with children daily (e.g., lead teachers, paraprofessionals, teaching assistants, and aides) or at least once per week (e.g., music, art, or science special teachers).

Item: Gross Motor

What is it?

Gross Motor measures time allotted for children to have daily access to outdoor and/or indoor gross motor play.

What does it measure?

This item assesses whether opportunities are given to children to engage in gross motor activities (e.g. run and use of equipment at the playground).

Why is it important?

During their preschool and kindergarten years, children continue to develop their large muscle coordination through active play.

Things to consider...

Schedule identifies gross motor play time

- The daily schedule identifies gross motor play.
- Gross motor activities should be vigorous
 - Children are seen to move freely, such as running, actively dancing, or exercising.
 - A neighborhood walk or walk to/from a playground is **not** considered a vigorous activity to physically challenge children.

If weather does not permit outdoor play, there is indoor gross motor play.

- There is indoor gross motor play when weather does not permit outdoor play.

Item: Learning Activities

What is it?

Learning Activities focuses on the use of books by children and staff, as well as opportunities for Center Time.

What does it measure?

Learning Activities measures whether staff read books to children and if books are easily accessible to children. In addition, this item measures whether children have Center Time/Choice Time during the observation.

Why is it important?

When staff read to children individually, in small groups or spontaneously, they help children develop a positive relationship with reading and books. Staff can read to children as occasions arise throughout the day and also provide opportunities for children to read books themselves

As children actively and confidently explore and learn through play, they develop the background knowledge that is essential for making connections and deepening their understanding. Furthermore, they are empowered and encouraged to intentionally self-select from a variety of learning activities and resources accessible to them that represent the diversity of children in the classroom and in New York City.

Things to consider...

Staff read a book with children at least once.

- Staff may read a book to children during Morning Meeting or a read aloud.
- Staff may also read a book to answer a child's question during Center Time.

There is at least one opportunity for children to use books.

- For example, children are free to read books during transition time and/or Center Time.
- After breakfast, children may read a book while waiting for peers to finish eating.

Center Time/Choice Time must be observed.

- For example, during Arrival, after children put away their belongings, they have the choice to read books, play with table toys, or use art materials.

Classroom Level

Purpose:

The goal of the Classroom Level data is to capture classroom space, availability of learning activities, availability and condition of furniture, as well as potential health and safety concerns and risks in areas used by children. **Data for items under this module is collected once per classroom.**

Items:

Addendum Item: Diagnosed Disabilities (Head Start Only)

1. *Hazards*
2. *Classroom Space*
3. *Handwashing*
4. *Meal/Snack*
5. *Social/Emotional*
6. *Learning Activities and Materials*

Explanation of Terms Used in this Module:

Accessible refers to the time during an observation when all children can easily reach and use spaces, materials, furnishings, and equipment (e.g., not on high shelves or in containers with difficult-to-open lids, or long wait times) and are not required to do something else (e.g., participate in a mandatory activity or complete a meal).

Engage means staff are paying attention and actively participate.

Staff refers to adults who work with children daily (e.g., lead teachers, paraprofessionals, teaching assistants, and aides) or at least once per week (e.g., music, art, or science special teachers).

Addendum Item: Children with diagnosed

disabilities

What is it?

To address Head Start Performance Standard Item 1302.61 (a) *Additional services for children with disabilities*, which states, “Programs must ensure the individualized needs of children with disabilities, including but not limited to those eligible for services under IDEA, are being met and all children have access to and can fully participate in the full range of activities and services,” it is necessary to first determine if there are children with diagnosed disabilities enrolled in each Head Start classroom observed.

What does it measure?

This item focuses on whether a Head Start classroom does or does not have children with diagnosed disabilities enrolled in it.

Why is it important?

It is important to know if there are any children with disabilities enrolled in a Head Start classroom before conducting observations so that evaluators have this information on-hand when looking at Item #8 *Adaptations for all children’s participation* using the CLASS Environmental Scales. Evaluators will observe how teachers support all children as individuals, including those with diagnosed disabilities in order to maximize their classroom participation.

Things to consider....

This information is collected for Head Start classrooms only.

- Evaluators must collect this information from staff prior to observing their classroom.
- This item does not include children with pending IEPs or children that staff believes may benefit from an assessment.

Item: Hazards

What is it?

Since many serious accidents in early childhood programs occur during play, safety of the space is critically important. Hazards are risks that can cause minor or serious injury.

What does it measure?

This item focuses on safety of all space(s) used by children.

Note: This scale will only assess classrooms and spaces that evaluators are present in during an observation.

Why is it important?

Young children are learning about the world by exploring and trying things out. Even if they have been told that something is dangerous, they can easily forget. It is up to responsible adults to protect the children in their care, to minimize hazards present in a child's space, and to supervise carefully.

Things to consider....

Hazards may include but are not limited to the following:

- Uncovered electrical/surge outlets
 - Outlets which are TRR (Tamper Resistant Receptacle) are acceptable. These outlets typically have "TR" written on the outlet.
- Exposure to cleaning materials (e.g., Clorox, products labeled "Keep out of reach of children".)
- Risk of tripping (e.g., rug or uneven surfaces)
- Risk of slipping
- Risk of heavy materials falling from high shelves or high furniture (e.g., Toys, books, and binders piled up high on top of a toy refrigerator.)
- Risk of entanglement/strangulation (e.g., Cords from blinds.)
- Risk of choking from small objects (e.g., Beans or beads from sensory table)
- Risk of being struck by a door
- Risk of burning

Item: Classroom Space

What is it?

The Classroom Space item considers areas of the room(s) used by the group most of the day.

What does it measure?

This item measures whether spaces used by children are clean and in good condition. It also looks at whether there is sufficient furniture for all children. Furniture should be sturdy and in good repair. There should also be enough space for children and staff in the classroom for routine and play.

Why is it important?

The amount of space is important because it influences the number and types of activities children can effectively engage in at the same time. The condition of the space is also important because it affects how children and staff feel about themselves and their comfort in the room. Space that is in poor repair or poorly maintained encourages rough and neglectful behavior towards the surroundings and materials and can be dangerous.

Things to consider

Spaces used by children are clean and in good condition.

- No major repair problems (e.g., peeling paint and hanging/missing ceiling tiles) that may cause health and safety concerns.
- Daily maintenance is apparent (e.g., sweeping floors, vacuuming rugs).

There is sufficient furniture for all children.

- There are enough chairs for children when they are seated at the table for meals and Center Time.

Furniture is sturdy and in good repair.

- There are no serious concerns for children's safety when using basic furniture (e.g., chairs).
- No tears in soft furnishings that expose the filling.

There is enough space for children and staff in the classroom.

- Basic furnishings for play and routines fit well into the classroom.
- Chairs and tables can be easily used.
- Staff and children can circulate freely (no crowding) around areas used for routines and instruction, throughout the day, with few problems.

There is enough space for children and staff to play.

- Children and staff can easily access materials during play. Minor interference acceptable.
 - Examples of noteworthy interference:
 - As a result of interference, staff and children must move furniture, reach/squeeze behind peers or furniture, step over play/peers, or wait for peers to move.
 - Play may spill into pathways because there is not enough space in the center.
 - Child(ren) and staff may ask others to move over to access a space.

Item: Handwashing

What is it?

This item considers whether staff and children washed or sanitized their hands before and after different

activities. Handwashing protects children's health and safety, and teaches them self-help skills.

What does it measure?

Handwashing measures whether children and staff attempt to wash hands when needed.

Why is it important?

Proper hand cleaning is an important tool for fighting and preventing diseases. Center for Disease Control statistics show that infectious diseases account for more than 164 million lost school days each year in grades K-12, with an even stronger impact in the prekindergarten years.

Things to consider

Children and staff should **attempt** to wash/sanitize hands:

- Upon arrival/re-entry in the classroom
- Before and after meals
- Other (e.g. bodily fluids, contamination)

Hand sanitizers may be used instead.

Item: Meal/Snack

What is it?

This item assesses whether staff attempts proper sanitization of tables before and after meals.

What does it measure?

This item focuses on whether proper sanitary procedures were attempted before and after a meal. In addition, this item measures whether each classroom keeps track of children with allergies and dietary restrictions.

Why is it important?

To prevent or reduce illnesses, such as gastrointestinal diseases, staff should consistently follow sanitary procedures. In addition, to ensure all children are safe, food allergies and dietary restrictions or a statement that none exist, should be visibly posted for adults in the room with appropriate substitutions provided during mealtimes, if necessary.

Things to consider

Staff should attempt to clean/disinfect table(s) before and after a meal.

- Prior to setting the table(s), staff should wipe them down with a cleaning solution.

Post food allergies and dietary restrictions, visible to adults.

- This information may be posted on a staff bulletin board, in the classroom.

Item: Social/Emotional

What is it?

This item focuses on staff-child and peer interactions that help build positive relationships. In addition to verbal communication, interactions happen through physical contact, gestures, the focus of attention, or facial expressions.

What does it measure?

The item looks at resources, such as a feelings chart, cards or photos to help children identify their emotions. In addition, this item focuses on interactions between staff and children and among children in the classroom(s).

Why is it important?

It is important for children to feel emotionally safe in their environment and comfortable to experiment and play. This is supported through positive interactions, active supervision, and age appropriate guidance.

Things to consider

In each classroom, there should be a feelings chart visible and easily accessible to children.

- The classroom may have this posted in a space for children to self-regulate.

There was little to no negative contact between staff and child(ren) and among children.

- Short, minor incidents may be acceptable.
 - For example, a staff member may take a child's hand to place them back in line. But this kind of touch should not occur frequently. It is important to note that guiding (hand over hand) and control touch are different.
 - In another example, a child may take a toy away from a peer and the peer bounces back quickly from being upset.
 - Overall, staff and children's reactions are important when considering them "minor".

Classroom(s) had a space for children to self-regulate.

- This should be an established space away from active play and classroom traffic where children can calm down or find security.

In the event there are hurtful peer interactions, staff respond quickly.

- Staff may ask children to explain what happened and how the situations made them feel.

Children should have opportunities to choose who and what to play with.

- For example, during Center Time, children can freely enter and leave centers.

Item: Learning Activities and Materials

What is it?

This item focuses on supervision provided by staff during play and materials accessible for children to explore.

What does it measure?

Learning Activities and Materials measures whether staff engages with children during play and if there are opportunities to access and play with sand or water and blocks during Choice Time/Center Time.

Why is it important?

Children are active learners who thrive when staff plan and respond to their learning and development throughout the day. When children can access learning centers and the materials in them, they have some of the essential supports necessary for their play to continue developing in complexity.

Things to consider

During play, all staff move around to different centers and interact with children.

- For example, a staff member may have conversations with a child in the Library for a few minutes. The staff member may then visit another group of children at the Dramatic Play Center and pretend to be a customer at their pretend restaurant.

Books are easily accessible to children.

- Books are placed on low open shelves in the Library or Reading Center, where children can freely reach for books and place them back.

There is evidence that sand or water table is used in the classroom.

- The activity table(s) are not used to stack books or other materials.
- Sand and/or water toys to dig, pour, scoop, and/or fill, is accessible to children on a daily basis.

Dedicated Block Center with sufficient space and blocks for 3+ children.

- The space is large enough for each one of them to successfully balance, build, and create large structures, such as long roads or large buildings, without interference from one another.
- There are enough blocks of varying shapes to allow at least three children to build structures without conflicts. Unit and large hollow blocks are considered in this item; small or interlocking blocks that fit together are fine motor materials and not considered in this item.

Addendum: Gross Motor Activities

What is it?

This item focuses on supervision during gross motor play and whether gross motor spaces used by children are free of hazards.

Things to consider

Staff provide adequate supervision and ensure children's safety during indoor and outdoor gross motor play.

- For example, staff do not leave children unattended.
- Staff attempt to monitor all areas of play, including potential hazards.

Hazards may include:

- Inadequate gross motor space
- Missing fence gate
- Missing gate latch
- Play space is not fully enclosed
- Lack of soft cushion/surface for gross motor equipment
- Uncovered electrical/surge outlets
- Risk of tripping
- Risk of injury from sharp objects

Locations of gross motor space include:

- On-site outdoor play space (e.g. outdoor playground at the program)
- Off-site outdoor play space (e.g. community park or neighborhood playground)
- On-site indoor play space (e.g. school gymnasium).