

An Answer: Quality Counts Five Star Rating System

Quality Counts is a major initiative of The Children's Trust to support quality childcare in Miami-Dade. It will benefit all children, but will be an especially important tool to help assure young foster children have access to an environment that can compensate for, rather than add to, the trauma of dependency.

Quality Counts is a voluntary rating system designed and funded by The Trust in partnership with the Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade/Monroe and the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation/Ready Schools Miami. It is administered in collaboration with Florida International University, the University of Miami Mailman Center, Devereux Florida, Family Central Inc., the Children's Forum, the National Institute for Innovative Leadership and the United Way Center for Excellence.

Importance of Rating

The Quality Counts system is organized around well-established standards for quality early education and gives providers the supports they need to meet those standards. The 5 Star rating system, along with other accreditations, will provide all who care about children with a way to identify quality programs.

Quality Counts is not a simple assessment and stamp of approval. Childcare programs taking part in the voluntary program go through an extensive process of self-assessment, professional assessment and planning for continuous quality improvements. Launched in early 2008, the initiative now includes 223 childcare centers, 70 family childcare programs and 72 Head Start programs, 20 Miami Dade Public Schools/Ready Schools Miami classrooms and 6 Redland Christian Migrant Association programs. Many of the first programs to complete the first year process will be receiving Star ratings over the next few months. Programs that are displaying satisfactory improvement and meeting required milestones can defer a Star rating for at least another year.

The Quality Counts Process

The Quality Counts goals are to improve the childcare programs and provide an easy tool for the adults who choose childcare programs. With Quality Counts, the instincts and observations of parents and

others will have an objective home. The standards cover the learning environment, staff to child ratios, staff qualifications, family engagement, program administration and the curriculum used in the program. Accredited programs will display a plus sign along with a Star rating. The process is a rigorous one, and will not be undertaken by those with a casual interest in improvement. It includes:

Overview Training

Interested programs start by attending training on the Quality Counts process and the supports available.

Application

Programs apply to take part in Quality Counts. The application covers detailed program information on staff qualifications, accreditation achieved and demographics of the children.

Selection

Quality Counts selects representative programs of all sizes serving families of all income levels from throughout the county. Zip code, size of the program and the number of subsidized children (if any), are among the criteria.

Technical assistance

Center-based and family childcare programs are offered technical assistance to help them through the assessment and quality improvement process process. A career advisor provides Help with professional development and access to scholarships to those that qualify.

Self-Study

The self-study is based on the quality standards and gives programs provides a snapshot of the process and their own program needs. It prepares programs for the formal assessment and the Quality Improvement plan.

Formal Assessment

After the self-assessment, every program receives a formal assessment by a professional early childhood program assessor who is

reliably trained. It is this formal assessment that helps determine the baseline score. The assessor verifies information from the self-study profile, and does the important environmental rating.

Baseline Assessment Score

The formal assessment leads to a baseline score for the programs. While the baseline score uses the same criteria as the Star Rating, the official star rating is not determined for a year.

Quality Improvement Plan and Implementation

After the baseline is established, the technical assistance specialist helps the program develop a quality improvement plan. Goals are identified through the assessment, including needs for staff development.

Supports

Supports are available to eligible programs to help implement the quality improvement plan. They can include technical assistance, training and grants to buy materials and equipment. Scholarships and incentives for training are also available. Programs that achieve high scores on the baseline assessment may be eligible for Achievement Awards and serve as model sites.

Renewal

Participating Quality Counts programs complete a yearly update report to document their progress. Programs feeling they have reached a three star rating can request a formal assessment and receive a Star rating. The update report must be completed every year but the formal star rating can be deferred for up to three years if the agreed upon quality improvement milestones have been reached.

Programs with a baseline score equivalent to a four or five star rating may elect to receive a star rating after filing the yearly update report. All programs must receive a formal assessment and be assigned a Star rating at least once every three years.

The Rating

The ratings that go into the Quality Counts score are based on broadly accepted childcare standards.

Environmental Rating Scales

The professional assessor uses the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised and the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale-Revised, well-researched tools that focus on the learning environment for the children. These scales look at the interactions that go on in the classroom between staff and children and between the children, the interactions children have with materials and activities, as well as such things as space, the day's schedule, furnishings and supplies.

Staff Qualifications

This part of the assessment looks closely at the training and experience of all program staff. Diversity, educational background, participation in continuing education and professional certificates all go into the score.

Staff/Child Ratios and Group Size

Any parent wants to see children in small groups with adequate staff. For the Quality Counts high standard for infants, for example, the groups must be no bigger than 8 with one staff for every four babies. The highest standard for four to five-year-olds would be 20 children with two staff.

Family Engagement

Family engagement looks at how communication and involvement with parents is addressed in the program: Whether there is a handbook whether emergency procedures and hours are identified, and whether nutrition policies are explained. The standard requires at least three modes of communication, such as newsletters, daily logs, bulletin boards and, for infants, daily written individual reports.

Program Administration

The assessment also looks at the nitty-gritty of program administration, which supports all the other standards. Such things as risk management in emergencies, written personnel policies, staff meetings, policies and procedures for the program operation and salary scales are included in this part of the assessment.

Curriculum

Programs must have a developmentally appropriate curriculum to guide the program. The assessment includes identification of an acceptable curriculum, whether staff have received training in the curriculum and whether the curriculum is actually being implemented. Information about curriculum is being gathered but is not currently assessed in Quality Counts.

The Score

The accumulated baseline scores and ratings result in a score of between 4 and 40 points, with each point range associated with a star rating. The system is not pass-fail. As a total voluntary process, it focuses on continuous program improvement. Programs receiving a score of 1 or 2 for example, do not have to receive a star rating. They can continue to work on improvements until they have reached a baseline score or rating that reflects their desired commitment to young children.

Quality for Foster Children

We should strive as a community to have all children in 5 Star programs. But foster children will be among those who can benefit most from the quality a high rating represents.

While the first Star ratings will be available in the near future, the Quality Counts system has already provided a template for what to look for and what questions need to be asked.

What are the staff/ratios? What is the environment like? What is the curriculum? Do the staff have early childhood credentials? Is this foster child receiving the best possible childcare?

And if not, it is our job to ask, why not?

Additional Information

What is Infant Mental Health?

http://www.cpeip.fsu.edu/resourceFiles/resourceFile_68.pdf?CFID=29770&CFTOKEN=54263289

Research on Quality Child Care for Infants and Toddlers

http://www.cpeip.fsu.edu/resourceFiles/resourceFile_81.pdf

Quality Counts Standards for Family Child Care Homes

<http://elcmdm.org/QualityCounts/PDFs/2008%20downloads/FCCHStandards111609.pdf>

Quality Counts Standards for Child Care Centers

<http://elcmdm.org/QualityCounts/PDFs/2008%20downloads/CenterStandards010909.pdf>