

ACCREDITATION

Accreditation is voluntary and intended to be a measure of quality. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) established its national, voluntary accreditation system in 1985 to set professional standards for early-childhood education programs, and to help families identify high-quality programs. The standards are used to raise the quality of programs for children from birth through age eight nationwide. NAEYC accreditation suggests that a level of quality has been confirmed by an independent entity. In 2002, a 10-member Commission appointed by the NAEYC Governing Board revised the NAEYC Early Childhood Program and Accreditation Criteria to make the standards more evidence-based and concurrent with the profession's knowledge of best practices. The new accreditation procedures and standards will be fully operational by January 2006. New self-study materials are available to providers as of December 2005.

The NAEYC's new draft accreditation standards provide best practices for 10 areas of program standards: relationships, curriculum, teaching, assessment, health, teachers, families, community partnerships, physical environment, and leadership and management. NAEYC performance criteria are provided by age group: infant, toddlers and twos, preschool, kindergarten. NAEYC requires the submission of support documents to establish performance in each of the 10 areas. Criteria are far more detailed and extensive than licensing standards. For example, in the area of "Relationships," one NAEYC criterion states, "Teachers evaluate and change their responses based on individual needs. Teachers vary their interactions to be sensitive and responsive to differing abilities, temperament, activity levels, and cognitive and social development."

Accreditation lasts five years, subject to the submission of annual reports, annual verification visits, and payment of annual fees. NAEYC is organized regionally. California is under the jurisdiction of the western region Information Coordinator, who provides resource information on quality, policies, and procedures to providers and the interested general public; Quality Management Coordinator, who reviews the annual reports; and Validation Coordinator, who arranges validation visits.

Nationwide, approximately 9,000 programs are accredited, serving more than 800,000 children. Since accreditation standards are high and there are both initial and ongoing operating costs associated with accreditation, less than 10% of facilities in California are accredited as of December 2005. Confirming accreditation can be done through the NAEYC website at www.naeyc.org/accreditation.

BEYOND ACCREDITATION

Since many providers cannot achieve accreditation due to programmatic, physical, and/or financial reasons, developers cannot rely upon the accreditation to determine quality and must often delve more deeply into the provider's program, their long-range plan for quality improvement, and their evaluation methodology. NAEYC and the environmental rating scales by age group established by Thelma Harms and Richard Clifford provide standardized performance criteria to measure "quality," which are informative to the developer, though more detailed than most developers require. The Harms and Clifford rating scales have been used quite extensively worldwide for program improvement, government regulation, teacher training and mentoring, and research and evaluation.