

Quality Early Childhood Care, Education and Development: A Case for Accreditation

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ABSTRACT The present study was undertaken to analyse the quality of childcare services. The study aimed to formulate standards/guidelines of quality care and development of children within the age group of six months to four years. Study also aimed to develop a regulatory system to ensure quality control through accreditation. The accreditation criteria was developed on the basis of present study after reviewing 36 childcare centres i.e. Day Care Centres and Nursery Schools of Ludhiana city for the period of two years. The results of the study revealed that quality of childcare services in Ludhiana (Punjab) was not of high order. Only 20 per cent centers fell in the category of good and 80 percent were average and poor centres. The physical environment and staff children interactions were found to be satisfactory in good centres. Health care, safety measures, nutrition and food services was better in Day Care Centres. Majority of the Nursery Schools followed a curriculum but it was mainly academic in nature. Majority of the schools admitted children at an early age. Children of good centres scored much higher in all the developmental outcomes than their counterparts. The results have been reviewed in the light of information collected from USA, Australia, New Zealand, England, Mexico, Canada and India. The accreditation criteria include ten component quality indicators of group programs for young children.

INTRODUCTION

Indian urban population has awakened to the need of early childhood care, education and development. The scenario of cut throat competition for children to get into good schools, later to good technical institutions and to universities is visualized as a sure ticket to getting into plum jobs in the government, business and industry. This calls for early initiation to formal schooling throwing all principles of child development to winds. Influx of more and more toddlers to a variety of pre-schools, nurseries, kindergartens etc. has whipped up demand for such centres, its administrators and care givers, who are styled as nursery teachers. Hopelessly low remuneration, grossly inadequate space and facilities are causing more damage than benefit to the psyche of children and parents. The scenario calls for governmental intervention in the form of accreditation of centres, care givers and teachers (Jaswal and Jaswal 2000).

Curriculum of most of the childcare centers is mainly academic, confined to rote memorization, early introduction of the three R's using Group teaching methods and paying little attention to the individual development. No or inadequate play way method is being used (Nanda 2000). Looking at the scenario of childcare services there is strong need to develop quality indicators/criteria to

assess the quality of childcare centers and need for accreditation of these centers to ensure uniformity and standardization throughout the country. Loeb et al. (2004) worked on childcare in poor communities: early learning effects of quality and stability. The study suggested that childcare quality and teacher's educational level affected child's cognitive and language development.

Mechanisms to improve quality childcare fall into two categories; regulatory and non-regulatory. Licensed standards ought to be recognized as minimum standards, designed to prevent programs that harm children. Better levels of quality may be established by promoting better standards of professional practice. One such method is accreditation. 'Accreditation' defined as a process by which a representative body, recognized by both the service community and community in general, establishes standards for services. The standards are above the minimum regulatory requirements of government programs apply on a voluntary basis for evaluation against the standards and, if found to meet or surpass them, are granted a certificate of recognition (Doherty 1991).

Accreditation is the evaluation of the quality of the infrastructure that supports childcare practice is a Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) methodology. Morgan (1987) articulates the similarities and differences between licensing and accreditation as under:

- Licensing is mandatory whereas accreditation is voluntary.
- Licensing standards are minimal requirements. Accreditation standards define high quality.
- Licensing requires 100 percent compliance. Accreditation based on substantial compliance.
- Licensing punishes non-compliance. Accreditation recognizes achievement.

Accreditation of childcare centres is of paramount importance as it helps in achieving better quality. It achieves its goal by bringing about change and improvement in programs. Accreditation centres employ staff with accredited formal education, better levels of early childhood education and adequate experience of working with children.

Steps in accreditation process.

The accreditation process involves three steps:

1. *The Self Study*

The self-study is the central element for the accreditation process. Program personnel conduct a self-study to determine how well the programme is going on, and how well it meets the criteria for high quality. Centre makes needed improvements and reports the compliance with the criteria on the proforma provided by the representative body.

2. *Validation*

The second step is the validation. Trained members or validators make an on site visit to verify the accuracy of the programme, description or proforma. The purpose of the on site validation is to verify that the information provided in the written proforma is an accurate reflection of the day-to-day operations of the programme.

3. *Accreditation Decision*

A committee of three or four members called accreditation committee considers the validated programme description and makes the accreditation design. (National Academy of Early Childhood Programmes, Washington 1992).

CRITERIA FOR HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMES: ACCREDITATION CRITERIA

The accreditation criteria as presented below was developed on the basis of present study after reviewing 36 childcare centres i.e. day care centres and nursery schools of Ludhiana city for the period of two years (Nanda 2000). The study analyzed the effects of various components /

criteria of an early childhood programme on children's developmental outcomes. The criteria include ten components of quality indicators.

The accreditation criteria is as follows

A. Physical Environment / Physical Setting/ Physical Structure

The physical environment affects the behaviour and development of the people, both children and adults who live and work in it. Since children grow, develop and learn through play, the entire programme and the environment of Pre School should build around play (Sinha 2005). Whatever type of building is used, the environment expected to be warm, welcoming and make the children feel at home to reduce the stress associated with transition from home to the outer world.

i. Location

- The childcare centre should be located on a land that provide good natural drainage.
- Stairs, porches should be maintained in a safe condition relative to the accumulation of water and should have non-slip surfacing.
- The building should be located at a site that is:
 - i) Easily accessible to the children i.e.
 - o If children have to walk, it should be within ½ to 1 km radius of the locality to which it is catering.
 - o Where transport is available, it should be within 1 to 8 km radius of the locality to which it is catering.
 - ii) The building should be safe from hazards like heavy traffic, ponds, ditches, nallahs etc.
 - o The Centre should be located on the ground floor.
 - o The surroundings of the centre must be clean, safe and healthy, pollution free, and away from distracting noises.
 - o The building should be well ventilated. Artificial light or natural light or both should be capable of providing sufficient light over the entire room at a height of three feet from the floor.
 - o All windows must have mesh doors.

ii Space

Space requirements are stated as minimum.

More space than minimum is preferred, although too much space can be a problem if not properly arranged. The key word is usable- space. The space used for permanent storage should not be measured when assessing amount of space. The following points should be taken into account:

- No room (regardless of size) should have to accommodate more than 25 children except for special occasions and where possible, the maximum should be lower for younger children, there should be a separate room for babies and toddlers with proper facilities for sleeping, nappy changing and preparation of food close to it.
- There should be appropriate facilities for children with disabilities.
- There should be a minimum of one lavatory for ten children with the same number of wash basins.
- There must be separate toilet facilities for staff.
- There should be office space and a staff room.
- There must be a kitchen which should be of an appropriate size and adequately equipped to provide meals and snacks to children and staff.
- There should be open play space, preferably adjacent to the building and exclusively for the use of the children. Where this is not possible, proper arrangements must be made so that the children are taken regularly to local parks or play grounds.
- If possible, there should be space for parents or other local visitors to meet. The person incharge should have a room where he/she talks to parents or other guests.

a. Play Space Outdoors

- Outdoor areas should include a variety of surface such as soil, sand, grass, flat sections, and hard areas for wheel toys.
- A balance between sunny and shaded areas may be ensured.
- The outdoor area should include digging space and a variety of equipment for running, jumping, riding, climbing, balancing, sliding, sand play and water play.
- Provision of lot of flowers, shrubs and pots along the boundaries will make the place look colourful and attractive.
- A tree to hang swings may be useful.

- The outdoor area should be protected by fence or by natural barriers.
- There should be a storage space for keeping equipment for play, located near the play area.
- It should be ensured that the open area is safe from snakes, mosquitoes and ants, particularly during rainy season. The plants must be properly pruned.

b. Play Space Indoors

- Activity areas should be defined clearly by spatial arrangement. Space should be arranged so that children can work individually, together in small groups or in a large group.
- Space should be arranged to provide clear pathways for children to move from one area to another and to minimize distractions.
- Individual space for children to store their personal belongings must be provided.
- Private areas should be available indoors and outdoors for children to have solitude.
- Age appropriate material and equipment should be arranged on low, open shelves to promote independent use by children.
- Rooms should be well ventilated and have adequate light.
- Children's work and other pictorial material at children's eye level must decorate walls.
- Mats/durpy/carpet and a set of low and light tables for a group of 6-8 children for creative activities are essential.

c. Space Standards

A minimum of 1200 sq. feet outdoor play space is recommended for a group of 20 children.

<i>Indoor</i>	<i>Age of child</i>	<i>Sq. ft./Child</i>
	Birth to 2 yrs	40
	2 to 3 yrs.	30
	3 to 5 yrs.	25
<i>Outdoor</i>	<i>Age of child</i>	<i>Sq. ft/Child</i>
	Birth to 2 yrs	60
	2 to 3 yrs.	45
	3 to 5 yrs.	38

B. Interaction among Staff and Children

Interactions between children and staff provide opportunities for children to develop an

understanding of self and others and are characterized by warmth, personal respect, individuality, positive, support and responsiveness.

All areas of young children's development-social, emotional, cognitive and physical are integrated. Optimal development in all areas derives from positive supportive and individualized relationships with adults.

- Staff should interact frequently with children. Staff should express respect for and affection toward children by smiling, touching, holding and speaking at their eye level throughout the day. Both verbal and non-verbal contact between adults and children should be frequent.
- Staff should speak with children in a friendly, positive, courteous manner and should ask open-ended questions and speak individually to children.
- Staff should treat children of all races, religions, family backgrounds and cultures with equal respect and consideration.
- Staff should treat both sexes without bias. Equal opportunities should be provided for boys and girls to develop to their full potential.
- Staff should encourage developmentally appropriate independence in children. Independence in routine activities such as picking up toys, personal grooming (toileting, hand washing), eating, caring for materials and other self-help skills should be encouraged.
- Staff should use a positive approach in guidance and discipline. It means recognizing why a child behaves in a certain way and encouraging more acceptable forms of behaviour.
- Staff should assist children to be comfortable, relaxed, happy and involved in play and other activities. They should help children deal with anger, sadness and frustration by comforting and helping them to use words in solving their problems.
- Staff should recognize and encourage prosocial behaviours among children such as co-operation, competition, helping, taking turns etc.
- Children should be encouraged to verbalize feelings and ideas. Adults should intervene quickly when children's response to each other become physical and must discuss the inappropriateness of such responses.

C. Curriculum

Curriculum is the sum total of the children's direct and indirect learning experiences in early childhood care centres or home based setting. It should promote the overall development of young children while responding to the needs of families.

- The childcare centre should provide a programme of daily activities and relationships that offer opportunities for the developmental growth of each child in the following areas:
 - a. Physical development including large and small muscles.
 - b. Social development including communication skills.
 - c. Emotional development including positive self-concept.
 - d. Intellectual development.
- The programme should have written curriculum plans based on knowledge of child development and assessment of individual needs and interests.
- There should be variety of activities so that children are given opportunities to develop physical, cognitive and social skills.
- The daily schedule should provide a balance of activities in consideration of the child's total daily experiences.
- The programme should provide for appropriate rest period during the day. A programme, which is of longer duration, should provide for a naptime.
- Children should work at their own pace as much as possible. Children should be free to choose their own activities during the day.
- The programme should be holistic in nature. It should include components of health, nutrition and early childhood education.
- Provision of meals and snacks in accordance with the nutritional status of children is essential.
- Medium of communication should be the mother tongue/regional language.
- The methodology for early childhood programme should be play and activity oriented and there should be no formal teaching of 3R's.
- The centre should permit parents to visit the programme for observing their children during daily activities.
- The use of media such as television, films and video tapes should be used as special events rather than as regular daily routine.

- Frequent parent contact activities, for example, home visits, meetings etc. should form a vital part of the pre-school programme.
- A record of the children's work should be maintained.

D. Equipment and Material

A child in the early childhood stage learns essentially through interacting with the environment and this interaction cannot occur in a vacuum. A child needs a stimulating environment, which must necessarily have a variety of materials to arouse and sustain his curiosity, interest and promote his learning.

- A centre should provide an adequate and varied supply of play equipment, materials and furniture which should be:
 - a. Appropriate to the developmental needs and interest of children.
 - b. Appropriate to the number of children.
 - c. Should be safe, clean and in good condition.
 - d. Should be child-sized or appropriately adapted for a child's use.
 - e. Easily accessible to the children.
- Equipment and materials should provide for:
 - a. Large and small muscle activity.
 - b. Sensory exploration.
 - c. Social interaction and dramatic play.
 - d. Discovery and exploration including structuring and restructuring.
 - e. Creative experiences through art, music and literature.

The centre should provide adequate furniture and furnishings, wherever possible there should be low adult-sized seating so that staff can sit comfortably on a level with the children.

- The centre must provide developmentally appropriate materials and equipment. NAEYC (National Association for Education of Young Children, 1991, Washington) had been working in this direction. Developmentally appropriate materials for preschoolers are active play equipment for climbing and balancing, unit blocks and accessories, puzzles, manipulating toys, picture books and records, musical instruments. Art materials such as paints, crayons, scissors, paste etc. Dramatic play materials such as dolls, dress up clothes child sized furniture, puppets sand and water toys.

E. Staff-Parent Interaction

Those concerned with children must recognize that parents have better knowledge of their own child. Staff has expertise in child development. Both compliment each other. Programs should develop strategies to work effectively with families.

- There should be verbal and written communication with all parents about the centre. A publication containing clear, concise information about the childcare centre should be given to parents when they make initial enquiries. The publication should include:
 - The philosophy of the centre
 - The policies of the centre on:
 - Entry/registration
 - Staffing-qualifications and experience
 - Fees-procedure for payment
 - Working hours-timings of opening and closing, collection of children after closing hours
 - Programme-basis, flexibility, sample program
 - Grouping of children
 - Admission policies-age of admission, criteria of admission
 - Parent involvement-especially in the beginning.
 - Parents should be welcome visitors to the centre at all times (for example, to observe, have food with the child or volunteer to help in the classroom).
 - There should be active exchange of information between staff and parents.
- a) Methods to be used by the centre for on-going consultation with parents:
 - Parents staff meetings
 - Direct contact with the staff
 - Through a notice board
 - Through a newsletter
 - Responding to surveys
- b) Formal and informal opportunities arranged
 - Social gatherings
 - Activity workshop/conference
 - Invited guest speaker
 - Pasting information on the notice board.
- c) The childcare centre should make provision at all times to inform parents of their child's progress by:
 - Daily verbal communication
 - Daily notice board
 - Time scheduled parent interviews e.g. Friday afternoon

- Individual pigeon holes
A notice board near the entrance to the centre can display information about changes, coming events and the food to be served during the week.

F. Staff Qualifications and Training

The quality of the staff is the key determinant of the quality of an early childhood programme. As working with young children is demanding and complex, caregivers require a wide range of skills in order to provide good quality services. A trained person will understand how to respond sensitively to young children's needs. Training can make caregivers aware of stages in child's development and the culture based need to adjust to the child's changing developmental needs.

- Individuals who are 18 years or above of age should staff the programme who have been trained in Early Childhood Education/ Child Development and who possess the appropriate personal characteristics for working with young children.
- The programme director/incharge/principal should be present all the time in the centre, and should be responsible for developing, implementing and directly supervising the total programme for children. The programme director should be a postgraduate with specialization in child development/child psychology/early childhood education.
- The master teacher or early childhood specialist should be employed to direct the educational programme. The qualifications of master teacher should be bachelor's degree in early childhood education/ child development and at least three years of full time teaching experience with young children.
- The staff ought to possess secondary skills e.g. music, dance, art etc.
- The programme should provide regular training opportunities for staff to improve skills in working with children. These may include attendance at workshops and seminars. Visits to other children's centres, access to resource materials, in-service sessions or enrollment in college level or technical courses.
- Even programmes with highly qualified staff need to provide regular in-service training to ensure that staff members update current knowledge and new ideas.

Personality of the Teacher

A child at this stage particularly needs an adult/teacher who has the necessary sensitivity, understanding and skills to handle and stimulate young children. Therefore, the personality of the adult/teacher/caregiver is a crucial determinant of an ECE programme.

The teacher/worker should be pleasant, energetic and innovative with a basic interest and concern for children. An ability to interact and communicate meaningfully by being able to come down to the level of children is a necessary prerequisite. Skills in performing arts, music, dance, are additional assets, which stand the ECE teacher in good stead.

Size of the Group

Generally, children are handled better in small groups rather than in large groups. This is so for a wide range of developmental indicators. The size of the group, which is the most beneficial, will change with the age of the children. Babies and toddlers generally need small groups than older children. For three and four years, research suggests an upper limit of 6-8 group size to optimize peer interaction. Large groups may lead to over stimulation and disruption. The total intake capacity has to conform to the space, in structure and personnel.

G. Staff: Child Ratio - Staffing

An important determinant of the quality of a programme is the way in which it is staffed. Well-organized staffing patterns facilitate individualized care. Research strongly suggests that small group size and larger number of staff to children are related to positive outcomes for children. Group size has both physical and psychological dimensions that vary with the age of the child.

The ratio of caregivers to children present at anyone time in the centre and during outdoor activities and field trips should be based upon the following provisions:

<i>Age group</i>	<i>Staff:child ratio</i>
Birth to 2 yrs.	1:5
2 to 3 yrs	1: 8
3 to 5 yrs	1:10

H. Age of Admission

The need for children, younger than three years, to come into an organised programme has arisen because of the growing incidence of mothers joining the work force. Experts recommend that the programme especially for children under three should be play oriented with no formal education. A child is ready for an organized childcare service when he/she (i) is able to take separation anxiety from family, (ii) has development –cum- verbal competence and can communicate basic needs and (iii) has become toilet trained.

Generally, a child is ready in these terms by three years of age. Before this age, he/she can go to a play centre.

I. Health and Safety

The provision of a safe and healthy environment is essential/obvious. No amount of good curriculum planning or positive adult-child interaction can compensate for an environment that is dangerous for children. A child who is made sick or injured by its surroundings is not appropriate. Good quality early childhood programmes should prevent illness and accidents, should be ready/prepared to deal with emergencies and should educate young children regarding safe and healthy practices.

i. Health Care

- Physical health examination of staff prior to employment and periodically thereafter to maintain good health is important.
- There should be a written record for each child including the results of complete health examination, record of immunization, and health history (such as allergies or chronic conditions).
- Facility of pure drinking water should be provided.
- Staff should adhere to hygiene principles, which reduce the spread of infectious diseases.
- a) Staff should wash their hands:
 - Before preparing, serving or eating food
 - After each nappy change and after assisting each child with toileting.
 - After wiping a child's nose.
- b) Staff should ensure that children do not eat food or use utensils, which are soiled.

- A clean Indian type toilet with water facility should be provided.
- a) Bathroom fixtures and sinks should be provided at a low level so that children can reach them easily.
- b) Exhaust fan should be installed in the bathroom window.
- c) Sinks at low level may be installed in each classroom.
- The supervisor of the centre must ensure:
 - a) That there is a suitable and fully stocked first aid kit at the centre
 - b) That at least one member of the staff of the centre who has training in emergency first aid treatment, is always present.
- Children's aprons, hand towels, should be washed at least twice a week. Nappies should be disinfected at least thrice a week. Toys, which are mouthed, should be washed daily.
- If a child is injured/falls sick while at a centre and needs immediate medical treatment the caregiver must:
 - a) Send the child to the medical practitioner.
 - b) Send the child home/inform the parents.
 - c) A child must not given any medication unless the written instruction of the parents.

ii. Safety Precautions

- Provision should be there for safe arrival and departure of all children. A policy should exist for ensuring that children are released only to authorized people.
- Children should be under adult supervision at all times. Parents and other volunteers to ensure supervision should accompany field trips.
- Play space should ensure safety of children i.e. prevent children from running out and getting hurt.
- The doors should be light in weight and should not be of self-locking or swinging type.
- All chemicals and dangerous products such as medicines, tools, and matches should be stored in containers in locked cupboards inaccessible to children.
- No toxic colour/paint should be used for play.
- All the windows should have screens/guards.
- Any arrangement made by the centre for transporting children should be safe, comfortable and convenient.
- The outdoor equipment should be firmly attached.

- A centre must have secure fencing around any parts of its grounds that are to be used by children who are under the age of six years.
- Any swimming pool or children's pool near centre must be properly fenced.
- Provision of fire extinguisher is necessary.
- Emergency telephone numbers should be pasted on the wall; these should include fire, and medical practitioner.
- The electrical service should be maintained in a safe condition.
- Play materials should not have any loose parts, which can be swallowed.
- At least one adult must sit with children during meals.
- Sufficient staff should be provided to carry about food service activities.
- Food should be prepared and stored hygienically.
- Staff must wash their hands before preparing or serving food.
- The food preparation areas should be well cleaned before and after use.
- Serving utensils and feeding bottles should be sterilized properly.
- Food should be stored and served to children at appropriate temperature
- Left over food should not be served.
- If the centre does not provide food, parents should be educated regarding well-balanced meals that may be brought from home. Food brought from home should be individually labeled (especially feeding bottles) and stored appropriately until served.

J. Nutrition and Food Service

The nutritional needs of young children should be met in a manner that promotes physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

- The centre should provide snacks and meals.
- Food served by the centre should be of sufficient quantity and nutritional quality to provide for the dietary needs of children as recommended by the Indian Council of Medical Research, New Delhi.
- Menu should be planned, should be dated and displayed for the benefit of parents.
- A child should be served meals and snacks in accordance with the following schedule:
 - a) For 4 to 6 hrs stay-1 meal and 1 snack
 - b) For 7 to 10 hrs stay-1 meal and 2 snacks
- Mealtime should be a pleasant social experience and should promote healthy nutritional habits.
 - Staff should initiate discussion about food (taste, texture, colour and nutritional value)
 - Children should be encouraged to participate in food preparation and service.
- Parents and children should be encouraged to participate in menu planning and food selection.

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