

## An Opinion on Rules/Regulations, Standards, and Guidelines in Early Care and Education

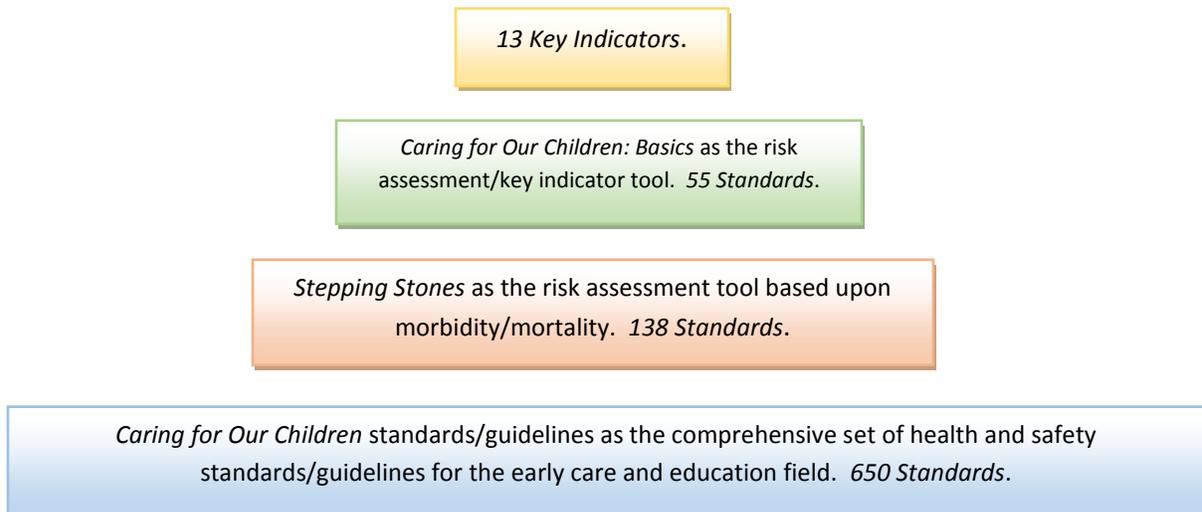
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August 2014

Over the past two years there has been a great deal of activity and interest in the Early Care and Education (ECE) field related to rules/regulations, standards and guidelines. This interest comes at an opportune time as the ECE field develops a balance between licensing (program compliance), program quality improvement via QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement Systems) & Pre-K programs, and structural and process quality.

Several publications have been put forth that represent these various activities which I would like to delineate and show how these various approaches fit together into a unified whole. The third edition of *Caring for Our Children* is the comprehensive set of standards/guidelines related to health and safety in the child care field. Its companion document called *Stepping Stones* is a risk assessment publication which focuses on those standards/guidelines that place children at greatest risk of mortality/morbidity. *Thirteen Indicators of Quality Child Care: Research Update* are the key indicators based upon *Stepping Stones* and *Caring for Our Children*. A relatively new approach *Caring for Our Children: Basics* is a combination of *Stepping Stones* and *Thirteen Indicators of Quality Child Care*.

I would like to propose the following model in how the above rules/regulations, standards and guidelines relate to each other and how one builds upon the other:



This is a particularly exciting time in which we have several different tools that can be used to help improve early care and education programs via the above model for health and safety and then utilizing QRIS and Pre-K programs standards to build upon this solid licensing foundation.

## **An Opinion on Balancing Structural and Process Quality Indicators in Early Care and Education**

I have been following a very interesting discussion in the early care and education field about quality indicators and their impact on young children. As QRIS (Quality Rating & Improvement Systems) systems have been providing the impetus for this discussion, I think it is time to readdress how process and structural quality indicators both benefit a child's development, albeit in different domains. Hopefully this discussion will be one of inclusion rather than exclusion in which we do not place greater emphasis on process quality indicators at the expense of structural quality indicators which appears to be at the heart of this most recent discussion.

In the research literature, the focus of structural quality indicators are generally in the health and safety domain and are more regulatable, such as staff-child ratio, group size, supervision, child immunizations up to date, proper staff hand washing, etc; while the focus of process quality indicators have been interactions amongst children and staff which do not lend themselves to being regulatable easily.

As a developmental research psychologist I have been delighted with the increased focus on the process quality indicators and agree that we need to spend more time focusing our efforts on identifying the key indicators that make a difference in a child's developmental life in early care and education. However, after 40 years of public policy research, I am not willing to throw the structural quality indicators "under the bus". It is important to advocate for those process quality indicators that have an impact on a child's language, social-emotional, motor, and cognitive development but we cannot leave out the child's physical well-being and healthy development. My concern as I listen to my fellow researchers, policy makers, and legislative staff as I crisscross the country is that everyone is talking a lot about the process quality indicators with little regard to the continued importance of the structural quality indicators.

I have lectured on this topic more than I would like to admit over the past 5 years. I was hoping by now that the "either-or" discussion would have given way to an "and" discussion which accepts and embraces the contributions of both structural and process quality indicators to a child's development. As of this writing, I haven't seen a change and in fact I think the discussions are becoming more divisive rather than inclusionary. So for that reason I am putting on paper my above opinion about this discussion and the need for additional research to build more effective and efficient early care and education regulatory systems that have a balance between structural and process quality indicators.

## **An Opinion on Balancing Program Compliance (Licensing) with Program Quality Systems (Pre-K and QRIS) in Early Care and Education**

In conducting several very recent studies where comparisons were made between program compliance as measured by state child care licensing systems and program quality as measured through Pre-K and QRIS (Quality Rating and Improvement Systems) some very interesting statistically significant trends in the data were observed.

I have published results in the past describing a curvilinear relationship between licensing compliance with program quality measures (Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) or the CLASS). With the advent of Pre-K and QRIS programs being introduced within states, we now have sufficient data to begin to analyze the impact that these quality improvement programs have on state early care and education programs building upon state licensing systems.

The results are very promising from the few states that I have worked with. From the data analyzed to date, both Pre-K and QRIS programs are having a very positive impact on the overall quality of ECE programs where the programs that either are in Pre-K or at the highest Quality level within the QRIS are also the programs scoring the highest on the respective quality assessments, the ERS or CLASS tools. Now this may not seem all that earthshattering but I have consistently found that this was not the case when I compared licensing compliance data with the ERS and CLASS data. The programs that were in full compliance with all the licensing rules were not necessarily the programs that scored the highest on the ERS or CLASS tools. In other words, there was a curvilinear relationship between the licensing data and the quality data.

From a public policy standpoint, this is a very important distinction because the licensing rules do help to protect children from harm in the health & safety arenas but do not necessarily mean the program is of the highest quality. It would appear from the most recent data that the way to get to this public policy result is through the introduction of either a Pre-K program or a QRIS program.

There is still work to be done to determine the exact indicators of Pre-K and QRIS programs that statistically predict child development outcomes but this requires additional research.

For those interested in continuing this discussion, please contact me at the following website: <http://DrFiene.wordpress.com/home> or go to <http://RIKInstitute.wikispaces.com/home> for additional information about quality ECE key indicator research. I can also be reached at [DrFiene@gmail.com](mailto:DrFiene@gmail.com)